

2-21-10 Homily by Fr. Larry Covington  
First Sunday in Lent C

When the world didn't end as soon as Jesus himself said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves. They hung wooden crosses on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to God the way they remembered the other enthusiasm of their youth. Oh to be young again and to believe everything is possible.

Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for----if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They didn't get arrested for championing the poor. They

blended in, they avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud.

Hearing that; someone suggested it was time to call Christians back to their senses, and the bible offered some clues about how to do that. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord. Elijah spent forty days there before hearing the still small voice of God on the same mountain where Moses spent forty days listening to God give the law. There was also Luke's story about Jesus' own forty days in the wilderness----a period of preparation between his baptism and his ministry----during which he was relentlessly tested by the devil. It was hard. It was really awful. It was necessary, if only for the story. Those of us who believe it have proof that it is humanly possible to remain loyal to God.

So the Church announced a season of Lent, from the ancient English word Lenten which means spring----not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to

what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it's like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.

There is a program called "Outward Bound" where you place yourself in the hands of strangers who make you rappel off cliffs and suffer all manner of survival techniques. The real test comes when you go solo. The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next twenty four hours. That's when you find out who you are. That's when you find out what you really miss and what you really fear. Some people dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with a door to lock and others just wish they had a pillow but they all find out what their pacifiers are----the habits, substances, or surroundings they use to comfort themselves, to block out the pain and fear that are normal parts of being human.

Without those things they are suddenly exposed, like someone addicted to painkillers whose prescription has just run out. It's hard. It's really awful. It's necessary, to encounter the world

without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God. I'm convinced that ninety-nine percent of us are addicted to something whether it's eating, shopping, blaming, or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty space inside of us that belongs to God. That hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It's the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that doesn't stop us trying. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, we stick our pacifiers in our mouths and suck for all we are worth. They don't nourish us but at least they plug the hole. To enter the wilderness is to leave them behind. To grow as a disciple is to discover how we can live full happy abundant lives without the false comforts that promise so much and give us so little.

This season of sacrifice calls out to us to sit down and think about whom we are in relation to this big wonderful world in which we live. Lent is a good time for us to take stock of those attributes we each possess and ask ourselves how they are used. How do I spend

my time? Is it spent in such a way that something of value comes of it? How do I exercise those particular gifts of mine...those abilities which make me stand out from others...Am I hiding my candle under a bushel or is it on a lamp stand giving out light for others? How do I give what I get? Does my giving say anything about my relationship to God?

Lent gives us the opportunity to ask these questions again and entering into the wilderness, leave behind the wasted time, the empty actions and the squandered treasures.

Lent gives us the opportunity to leave behind the pacifiers we have used to trick us into thinking we're "OK". Giving up that something you know is your personal pacifier gives you the opportunity to really see what's going on. When your mind travels to the pacifier, ask yourself why it happens. What's going on when you start to crave whatever it is you crave. Are you hungry? Well, what's wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What's so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it and see what you find out.

Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you give up your pacifier. That's a power tool. Can't you tell the difference?" If you don't fall for that one, there is always level three: "If God really loves you, you can do whatever you want. Why waste your time on this dumb exercise?" If you don't know whom that voice belongs to, read Luke's story again. Then tell the devil to get lost and decide what you will do for Lent. Better yet, decide whose you will be. Worship the Lord your God and serve no one else. Expect great things, from God, and from yourself. Believe that everything is possible. Why should any of us settle for more and miss the best?