

First Sunday of Lent 2018

Beauty Behind and Before Us

On May 3, 1973, I was driving to Canton to keep vigil at my father's deathbed. It rained most of the way. As I neared the edge of town, I saw in the rear-view mirror, a most beautiful rainbow. I got out of the car and stood in awe of its beauty.

Tomorrow's first reading from Genesis is a reminder that beauty stands stalwart at our backs and lovingly impels us forward on our journey through Lent, our journey in the shadow of the cross to the radiance of resurrection. What is this impelling beauty? It is the loving relationship of God's covenant with us. In the first reading from Genesis we hear God saying:

See I am now establishing my Covenant with you and your descendants and with every living creature. See, I set my bow (my rainbow) in the clouds to serve as a sign of covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings.

Covenant, a gift beyond our imagining! Our God takes the initiative to enter a deep and lasting relationship with us, individually and as a people. This longing for us that burns in the heart of God is repeated often throughout the scriptures. "If you will, I will be your God, and you will be my people." God lovingly reaches out to us and we, in turn, through our baptism, monastic profession and eucharist, live into that covenant

relationship. And with the prophet, we proclaim, “In you I live and move and have my very being.”

Right now, I would like you to take a moment and remember the most beautiful rainbow you have ever seen. The arc of the rainbow that you see in your mind’s eye is your gateway into the Lenten desert. With the strength of God’s covenant relationship and the beauty of the rainbow guarding our backs, we go into the desert with Jesus. In just a few words the Gospel of Mark tells us this story:

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days and was tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts and the angels ministered to him.

Jesus knew the desert was a dangerous place and staying there was most difficult. Its danger lies in the fact that the desert monotone, like the monotony of a monastic day, can deceive us and lull us into carelessness, boredom, acedia! As Jesus was tempted by Satan, we too have experienced the wiles of the noon day devils who, with shackles of self-doubt, self-deprecation, denial, anxiety, anger, and arrogance—to name just a few, hold us in bondage and hinder us from becoming our best selves, hinder us from realizing the great gifts that God entrusts to each of us. The dangers of the desert, of monastic life, demand that we stay awake, be alert, and attentive. To live well in the desert, or in the monastery, calls for mindfulness, prayer and a contemplative heart. To live well and thrive calls us to recognize and utilize the unique gifts and strengths that God has entrusted to us. We are so aware of our weaknesses and faults, but how well do we know and claim our personal, God given gifts and

strengths? It is lifegiving to name them and nurture them; they are the flowers that bloom in the desert.

Like desert dwellers, we must sharpen our eyes to perceive the subtle beauty and strength around us and within us. During this lent, let us focus on our beautiful, unique gifts of hospitality, creativity, musicality, prayerfulness, kindness, courage, service, suffering, leadership and so many more. These are our communal and personal gifts—given to us that we may enter more deeply into the Covenant relationship and to upbuild God’s reign on earth through loving service. Lent, walking the desert road, is all about love. It is a special time for us to live more intimately with God.

In accord with Benedict’s teachings on Lent and Sr. Karen’s request, we have written resolutions that could serve as maps to help us run along the desert road. Steeped in the practice of the ancient disciplines of prayer, fasting, almsgiving and silence our vision will be clearer, our heart enlarged with love. These directions now lie within our sight as daily reminders of our desire to live in intimacy with our God and to show loving kindness to those with whom we live and work. Emboldened by the beauty of the Covenant and the rainbow, we journey the desert road in the shadow of the cross to the radiant, resplendent beauty of resurrection. We make this journey, not alone but in the company of our monastic family and together we look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing.

Knowing the reign of God is at hand, we travel the desert road with the gospel as our guide. Beauty stands stalwart at our back, the beauty of nature seen in the rainbow; the beauty of God's Covenant face seen in the faces around us; the beauty and strength of God's abiding presence within us discovered in silence. That beauty lovingly impels us forward on our journey in the shadow of the cross to the radiance of resurrection for the paschal mystery is the pinnacle of Covenant Love.

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