

DON'T GIVE UP!

Lent I, 2021

Many of you may have heard of Fr. Jim Martin, the Jesuit priest who is a writer and progressive social commentator. I happened to see Fr. Martin last week on the Stephen Colbert show. Martin has made several appearances on the Colbert show, and they are obviously friends. In fact, he refers to him as his “chaplain.” Colbert noted that the season of Lent was about to begin, and in reference to the mostly Catholic custom of “giving up something,” wondered if, given the magnitude of the losses we’ve already experienced in this past year, we might be given a “pass” on needing to renounce anything else. For many people, this Lenten custom has become almost a superstition. They worry that if they fail to give something up, they’re going to be in big trouble with God. Some use this custom as an opportunity for some personal renovation project, such as giving up alcohol, dessert or otherwise losing a few pounds. I once met a man in an alcohol treatment center who told me that he couldn’t be an alcoholic, because every year he was successful in not drinking during Lent. Some seem to have the idea that if we behave ourselves for forty days one a year, we can kind of “coast” the rest of the time!

Fr. Martin never gave a direct answer to Colbert’s question, but went on to describe his own custom for Lent. He told how a Jewish friend in college was curious about why he would “give up” something at this time of year. When Martin explained it, his friend said that it wasn’t so much of a sacrifice if you got to decide what to give up. And so, from that day forward, his friend would call him on the morning of Ash Wednesday and tell Martin what he has to give up that year: usually in three categories: a food, a spice, and a candy.

These religious customs, or minor spiritual disciplines, are all well and good. I’m just not so sure they take us very far in achieving what I believe Lent is all about: mainly a time for a growing unity with God. But I was also taken by Colbert’s point: We have lost so much during the past year, ranging from the lack of freedom to move about and engage with others, to the death of loved ones through COVID. Enough with the sacrifice, already. Maybe giving up that extra glass of wine or bowl of ice cream that we’ve been consuming since the start of the lockdown would be in our best interests, but I don’t think it’s going to give us much of a spiritual boost.

The forty days of Lent, including the customs associated with the discipline of sacrifice, came about in imitation of the period which Jesus spent in the desert immediately following his baptism and the announcement that God’s favor rested on this servant. The sequence of events may help us to understand Jesus’ retreat a little more deeply. Clearly, Jesus didn’t have to prove anything to God or anyone else. He had already been endorsed. All the accounts period mention that he was “driven” by the spirit in to what seemed to be a rather precarious pilgrimage, living with wild beasts and fasting for forty days. Perhaps this is a renunciation of ordinary existence, at least for a time; Jesus blends into the wilderness in a way which brings him closer to nature and less dependent on the ordinary comforts of daily living. But this is also the setting for a grand, cosmic contest of sorts. Mark simply states that Jesus was “tempted by Satan” but we’re not told what those temptations consisted of. You have to go to the gospel of Luke for a more detailed description of the contest, in which Jesus rejects attaining power and submitting to the domination of the forces of evil. But we can also assume that this time apart from the ordinariness of life was a time for the contemplative Jesus to notice the ruggedness as well as the subtle beauty of the landscape and breath in the life of the spirit which would sustain him for the work ahead. Jesus was alone with the fullness of the Holy.

Although Jesus does not succumb to temptation, we can read his desert sojourn as a surrender to the precarious reality of the world, in which all remain vulnerable to forces outside of any given individual’s control. If this year has taught us anything, it has been a reminder of how quickly and easily conditions can change and what we take for granted can slip from our grasp. We did not choose the sacrifice of the past year. Jesus may have fully consented to what was to be his fate, but he also did not choose the specifics of what would become of him. What he did choose to do was to face his truth and reality with full commitment and with love.

I do not believe that God sends us difficulty in order to “test” us. Life will test us plenty without God’s help. But “finding God in all things” means that even in the face of difficulty, grace may be found. I find myself thinking a lot about the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement during this past year. As painful as it has been for many of us to become even more aware in our conscious and unconscious complicity in racism in this nation, it has also been the beginning of a reckoning with the deep scars of white supremacy. The temptation is always to turn away from what perplexes and makes us uncomfortable, but it is grace which allows us to resist the flight into safety and stay and listen to the voices that are speaking the truth of their lives. I believe that when Jesus was in the wilderness, he contemplated the lives of those in society who were most vulnerable and abused, the very people he went to heal as he emerged from his solitude back into daily life. It’s not about always looking at the “bright side” of things, but of looking at what appears to be dark but which calls forth the possibility of hope.

I agree with Stephen Colbert. There has been enough loss this year. We do not need to choose more deprivation. But we do need to find the grace and courage to continue to face reality as we slowly emerge from the winter and hope for a spring which will be the beginning of a restoration of a more spontaneous and spacious life. “Surrender” does not mean submission as a kind of hopeless resignation but means a serenity in accepting what we cannot change with the commitment to continue to embrace life in as many ways as we can. May the wilderness of this Lent provide us with the opportunity to see God more clearly in all things, and to allow the preciousness of creation to sustain our hearts as we commit ourselves to continue the urgent work of being God’s disciples and friends.

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