

Moses, a refugee who fled Egypt and the court of the Pharaoh lest he be tried and convicted for murdering an Egyptian taskmaster for beating a Hebrew slave has found refuge with Jethro and married his daughter. He was attending his father-in-law's flocks, working as a simple shepherd, when he encountered God in the form of a burning bush on Mount Horeb. God commands Moses, the shepherd, to free his people from physical slavery in Egypt. Physical freedom. Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd is sent by the Father to free his people from slavery to sin. Spiritual freedom.

We live in a country where we are blessed with the physical freedom to seek spiritual freedom through the Sacraments and in our personal relationship with God. Do we make use of this great gift or do we squander it thinking that we can always catch up tomorrow?

Saint Paul reminds us of the mighty deeds that God performed as Moses led his people through the desert. The parting of the Red Sea as a foreshadowing of the Sacrament of Baptism; in the minds of the Corinthians this would also bring up the wiping of Pharaoh's army from the face of the earth as a foreshadowing of how Baptism wipes away sin. (*Ex 14: 10-31*)

Then he mentions spiritual food, manna and quail (*Ex 16: 4-15*) sent down by the Lord God to feed his people in the desert. We enjoy the very best of spiritual food, the Eucharist. This may be the only reason that the Angels would have to be jealous of us in our humanity. They are in God's presence in heaven as someday we hope to be. But we are the ones, not the Angels who are privileged to have God become one with us, body and soul in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. (*Blessed Fulton Sheen*)

At Massah and Meribah (the place of testing and quarreling) at God's command Moses struck the rock in the presence of the Elders of Israel and water flowed out to provide for the people and flocks of Israel. (*Ex 17: 1-7*) Rabbinic legend says that this rock followed the Israelites through the desert providing water for them for their 40 years of wandering. This spiritual rock poured out gifts upon them, with the rock that was the presence of God in their mist. We share in the very same gifts from the Church built on the stone that was rejected, which has become the corner stone, Our Lord Jesus Christ and on the rock who is Saint Peter.

Yet, the first time the people of Israel arrived at the land that was to be given to them they were afraid and rejected God's gift. (*Num 13:25 – 14:4*) God was going to destroy them for the sin of rejecting his gift, but Moses begged him to have mercy. Then God sent the Israelites to wander in the desert for 40 years until everyone who had seen his mighty works as they left Egypt, crossed the desert and had rejected his gift of the land of Canaan had died. (*Num 14: 20-23*)

How many times a day do we reject God's gifts? Opportunities for reconciliation, to help someone looking for a few dollars, the chance conversation where we could rise up and defend our faith to others. In a conversation with my spiritual director, he made the point that most of our sins aren't in what we do, but in what we fail to do. In our society, our greatest failure is our inability to uphold the fundamental dignity of the human being, our brothers and sisters. Not just in the big things like murder, and pornography but also in the more subtle interactions like saying thank you for a glass of water to the waitress when we eat out or thanking our family members for doing laundry.

The Israelites rejected God and ended up wandering for 40 years in the desert. When we reject God we are in danger of spending time wandering in the deserts of Purgatory or if the rejection is egregious enough, eternity in the fires of hell.

You may ask: what about me? I am faithful, I have checked all the Catholic boxes; Mass, Reconciliation at least once a month, say a Rosary daily, have my favorite Saints and bad things still happen to me. Why?

I don't know. Only God knows why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. Even in the examples Jesus used in the Gospel today, he didn't give an explanation to why the Roman Soldiers at Pilate's command entered the temple and slaughtered the people offering sacrifice or why the men were killed when the tower they were working on collapsed.

There are some points that we know and may reconcile us to these types of tragedies. First is that all of God's actions are bent toward salvation. When something bad happens to us, we have to have the patience of Job. We need to recognize that if we are going through tough times that they are an opportunity for spiritual growth. We can either curl up in a corner or we can pray and work our way through to a better time and place.

As Father mentioned last week, everyone suffers. It is part of the human condition, we can't escape it. Suffering is also the instrument of salvation. It is in one simple act; that is the daily intention of offering up our sufferings to God that we tie our lives to the Cross. If we don't have any suffering in our lives, then we don't have a Cross to bear therefore we don't have a path to salvation.

Some of our suffering, our sorrow must be for the sins of our society. We must not be afraid to weep at the thought of the children lost to abortion, the lives lost to war, the horrendous crimes that are plastered on the television every night to the point that we become numb to the suffering of others. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (*Mt 5: 4*) It is when we aren't crushed by what we see and hear that we have a problem.

The most important point is the one Our Lord made in the Gospel today; (*Lk 13: 5*) we don't know when our end is coming, all we know is that it will come and we need to be prepared. Remember my opening comment about squandering our gifts because we think that we always have tomorrow? Tomorrow never comes, seek reconciliation today and be prepared lest when Our Lord calls us home we are unprepared and we suffer the penalty.

What about the story of the non-productive fig tree that seems to be tacked onto the end of this Gospel reading? With everything else that is wrapped up in the readings today it seems to just be hanging out there as something to take up time, when in fact it wraps it all up in a neat package.

We are all fig trees in the garden of life, drawing nutrients from the Holy Spirit. We are all here for a purpose, to bear fruit for the Kingdom of Heaven. God the Father is the Master; the Jesus is the gardener working the vineyard with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He is willing to be merciful and work with us and he does so in numerous ways, not the least of which is the Church and the Sacraments. But we won't live forever; our days will come to an end. Before that day comes will we respond to all God's mighty works, his gifts and bear fruit, or will we be cut down and thrown into the fire because we failed to respond to God's generosity?