

## The Homily - 1st Sunday of Lent

Last month, we celebrated the feast day of a Saint named Anthony, who heard the voice of God as a young man living in the Church of the 3rd century.

For Anthony, this encounter with the Lord's will began at the young age of 20, when he heard the words of the Gospel of Matthew: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

St. Anthony was struck to the heart, and knew that the Lord was inviting him to follow this command in the most direct way. And so he did, giving away all his worldly possessions and traveling throughout Egypt, to learn from the hermits and ascetics who had discovered a similar vocation.

Eventually, he would take this call even further, and set out into the desert, where he himself would remain as a hermit for twenty years.

According to the histories of his life, Anthony understood his mission as a call not merely to run from the world, but to run *toward* a spiritual battle, one that he would wage in his own soul with the weapons of prayer, fasting, and abstinence.

You would think that living alone in a ruined desert fort would be enough solitude, but at times, Anthony found that he needed to be even more intentional.

One account recalls that on at least one occasion, he decided to go on retreat by sealing himself away inside of a tomb so that he could experience some 'real' silence.

He didn't remain there forever, though. If he had, we likely wouldn't remember his story.

Eventually, St. Anthony would even return to society to form others in the spiritual lessons he had mastered, and establish the communities and foundations that were among the first of what we know today as monasteries, a place where men and women could live in common to devote their lives completely to God.

Stories like that of St. Anthony of the Desert may sound bizarre to us, in our modern age and lives of comfort, and yet he is remembered as someone who by all accounts lived his life to the full.

He was relatively uneducated, yet renowned for his wisdom.

He lived a life of self-denial, but lived a vigorous life to the ripe old age of a hundred and five.

He lived a life of constant spiritual warfare, but he was one of the few people who could be said to truly know interior peace.

For us, as we embark on this journey of forty days through this season of Lent, we are invited to follow the model set for us by none other than Christ himself, who journeyed into the desert not to run from Satan's assaults, but to confront them head-on.

The experience of Lenten penance and purification is one in which we, like the saints and even Our Lord himself, intentionally seek a deeper experience of silence, solitude, and detachment, setting aside comforts of our daily lives in search of a deeper union with the will of God.

Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving each serve as a means by which we face off against the sins and temptations that hold us captive in so many parts of our lives.

This season is, at its heart, an invitation to follow Our Lord into the desert.

Jesus himself accepted the trials of temptation and the dangers of the wilderness so that no matter what we ourselves might have to confront on our journey of conversion, we can know that Christ has already shared in that burden and experience.

This is all the more important for us to remember because as we enter this process of purification, there may indeed be a temptation of sorts to try to make the desert, in a sense, not a desert.

To try to hang on to the distractions and comforts of the world, or try to make it easy for ourselves.

To try to run from this dimension of our Lenten journey would be to miss the point entirely.

On the other hand, we should also remember that Lent isn't about doing everything right, or completing an arbitrary challenge.

It's not about going harder and doing more penance and giving more alms than your friends or neighbors.

We don't get a prize ribbon for being the saddest penitent.

The action that really matters isn't what we do for God - it's what God does in us.

The silence, the fasting, the intensity of the commitment that St. Anthony lived in the desert wasn't because he had some exceptional power to force himself into holiness.

It was his way of removing the obstacles to God's movement in his soul, and stepping away from the noise of the world so he could hear his voice.

Those obstacles and that noise will take different forms for each of us, and so too our Lenten observances will need to take different forms.

We should continue to pray seriously, even as we have already begun this season, about how the Lord is inviting us deeper into this process of interior conversion.

In the end, though, we will indeed need to be courageous.

Like Noah passing through the waters of the sea, the Lord has promised that through the covenant of our baptismal union with Him, we have the opportunity to experience a life of real freedom.

And like St. Anthony, like Christ himself, when we pass through to the other side, we will be more ready than ever before to return to the world and share the Gospel with all who still wait in captivity.

Yes, there will be storms and tribulations, perils, wild beasts, and every other kind of stress and distraction our modern world can conjure up.

But the Lord will be our anchor in the storm. He has endured every temptation and suffering, and more - and he will be our safeguard against the dangers and assaults of the evil one.

So don't be afraid of what's to come, whatever it may be.

Embrace the journey, draw strength from the graces given to us in this sacred liturgy, and set out to follow Our Lord - follow Jesus Christ, our savior - into the desert.