

From The Pastor

Welcome to the Lenten season. May the Lord Jesus touch our minds and our hearts with a new and deep awareness of his saving love. May our prayer, fasting, and alms giving inspire us to the joy and the peace of Christ in the promise of his salvation.

As described in the first two prefaces of Lent, we are entering a 'joyful season, and 'this great season of grace' as God's gift to us as his family. Perhaps 'joyful' and 'gift' are not the first two words that come to mind when we think of Lent. It is more likely that we perceive the tension or challenge of having to give something up, or the call to turn up our attention on our spiritual life. It is true that the season calls for an extra effort and awareness to personal and spiritual disciplines. Yet the nature and purpose of these efforts are rooted in our love and desire for God, and the gratitude we wish to offer for God's love and mercy.

By its nature, Lent\Easter is a baptismal season. All that we do in preparation during the season culminates in our Profession of Faith and renewal of baptismal promises at Easter. Our baptism is our initiation into Christ, and now our oneness with him. Beyond the ritual sacrament of Baptism, we embrace and continue to mature in the relationship and life it promises. Like all relationships, baptism grows and matures in us, drawing us toward the life and love of God we have received through water and the Holy Spirit as a sacramental sign of God's presence and peace.

The action and promise of baptism is the love of the Father as it is revealed and given in the person of Jesus. Through Baptism, we enter into and share in God's life by the reconciliation accomplished by the dying and rising of Jesus. Now we share in the unity of the Father's love, given in Jesus, now present in the Spirit.

Having recently celebrated the Baptism of Jesus, we can easily recall the words spoken of him: 'this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'. Jesus himself is changed by these words, and they inspire the beginning of his public ministry. Secure as one loved by the Father, Jesus can go forth with deep peace and clarity for his mission. By this experience, Jesus knows who he is in a deep and confirming way.

Notice that today's gospel immediately follows the Lord's baptism. After his baptism, his confirmation into the Father's love, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted. Armed with the identity of the Father's love, Jesus is prepared for his role and work as Savior and Lord. Because Jesus knows who he is as the beloved of the Father, he can quickly recognize the deception and lies of the evil one.

Notice how the devil tempts Jesus. 'If you are the Son of God turn these stones into bread'; 'if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here...'. Jesus is tempted in his identity as the Son of God. He is being challenged to prove his identity with miraculous acts of divine power. However, Jesus will not test the Father against these false promises of bread and safety. Why is Jesus so strong and clear in the midst of these temptations? We are not nearly so clear and strong in the midst of countless temptations of our own.

Jesus knows who he is as the beloved of the Father. Knowing that he is loved and valued by the Father, he does not surrender to the lies and deceptions of this world. Still, Jesus is vulnerable to their agitations in the flesh. In the Father's love, Jesus has all the power and truth anyone could ever need or want. Jesus is tempted on the level of the flesh, but such temptations are no match for the strength of his life in the Spirit. Nothing in the life of the flesh can stand against the truth and life that is his as one in the Spirit. This life in the Spirit is the love of the Father that is the identity and mission of the Son.

The love of the Father is the salvation that Jesus brings to the world. Through baptism, we receive it and share its promise. But we forget who we are in Jesus, and that his Spirit is within us. In the incompleteness of our human nature, we fall to the temptations of the flesh in greater or lesser ways. We forget who we are as people of the Spirit, secure in the Father's love. We forget we are his beloved ones. The wounds and fears we experience in life cause us to protect and defend ourselves. These defenses often block out or hide our identity in God. As such, the things of the world seem all too appealing to secure our comforts, or defend against our fears.

The Lenten season is a time to be reminded and restored to our original blessing in God. With and through Jesus, we are the beloved of the Father. This is your identity in God. You cannot change it or mess it up. God gave it to you. It is not lost by human sin, only hidden and obscured. How is it restored? Jesus knew he was loved and valued. In this knowing, he could do anything in the name of love. We cannot love and value ourselves or others unless we are first loved and valued ourselves. Make this part of your Lenten 'fast'. Remind yourself how loved and valued you are by loving and valuing those the Lord has put in your life.

Blessings for a happy and holy Lent.
Father John Esper