

**Ps 91:1-2, 9-16; Dt 26:1-11;
Ro 10:8b-13; Lu 4:1-13**

Last Tuesday was Fat Tuesday, or Mardi Gras in French. Big festival in Catholic nations. Actually, everybody enjoys Mardi Gras, whether they are Jesus followers or not. Festive food and drink – parades – music and dancing – carnival entertainment...A big party before – what? Before the forty days of Lent. Lent is the season of the church in which we are called to reenact (to re-member) Jesus' season of testing and temptation in the Judean wilderness. But, look again at the forty days.

The forty years in the Sinai Desert is a picture of Jesus' ordeal – and vice-versa. The two stories echo one another. As someone said, "History doesn't repeat itself, it rhymes." Before the coming of Messiah, the Exodus was the greatest liberation story ever. The Scriptures link the saga of Moses and God's people – with Jesus' ministry and passion, which is the story of moving into the light of God out of the darkness of a fallen creation. Jesus leads us in an Exodus –and He empowers us to do it right this time. He does everything well.

Both of these journeys bring us – the children of God – into freedom. Freedom from slavery and hard labor in Egypt – freedom from the bondage and agony of sin and rebellion in the City of Babylon. Yes, Babylon. Babylon and Egypt are the code names of the three Rs: Rape, Riot and Rebellion. When the New Jerusalem comes to earth, the rebellion will end, and the perpetrators of that rebellion will go into the lake of fire for all eternity. Who is the ring-leader of the rebellion against God?

Satan! Make no mistake, though Christ defeated old Slew-foot on the cross of crucifixion, the devil (still) “prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” (1 Pe 5:8) The devil accomplishes this by temptation and deception. The analogy of catching a big bass with an artificial lure is a great analogy of Satan casting for the unwitting, or the bitter, or the sleepy believer ready and willing to take the bait. What looks so tasty and delicious is full of barbed hooks. That is temptation.

What is the believer to do? Look at the promises in the psalm for today. We take refuge in our

God. We seek Him – learn about Him and His great love for all His creation. Then, we turn to Him expectantly. The Scripture says God will rescue us and honor us and satisfy us with saving grace – help in trouble – angels surrounding us.

There is no formula for seeking and finding and calling upon God. Any order of prayer and praise that honors our Holy God – that offers worship and obedience – is acceptable. Look at the Israelites in the Deuteronomy passage. Bringing a sheaf of grain means they have settled, ploughed, planted and harvested a crop. They bring a thanksgiving offering, they proclaim the mighty works of God. They tell the Exodus story again. They bow down and worship their Deliverer – our Deliverer.

Paul gives us the closest thing to a recipe for our response to the Creator God through Jesus Christ. Do a close reading of the Romans passage for today:

God's Word launches the dynamic of our rescue from the fallen world – “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” (v 8b) He's quoting Moses from Dt 30. You have heard the Word of

God – from the Holy Scripture and in the testimony of believers.

Confessing that Jesus is Lord is what Paul calls the word of faith. As we take in the Gospel word, we breathe out our confession that Jesus is Lord.

Our faithful heart knows that God raised Jesus from the dead. In this belief and confession is our justification before God. Being reconciled to God brings deliverance from Satan's doom.

Calling on Jesus for Everything is the hallmark of the Jesus-follower. In trouble, in happiness, for our needs and for our help we call on Jesus believing He will show up and rescue us. So, God's Word, our words of confession and witness, then trusting and calling on Jesus to save our life – so are you sealed in the blessed Holy Spirit and given refuge in the chaos of this confused world.

You may feel as though you are praying in a spiritual desert, a wasteland, a wilderness. Spiritual dryness is everywhere in the culture. We see people thrashing about to find an anchor in this whirlwind of doubt and anxiety. Because of neglect and hard-heartedness among people, there is a famine of hearing the Word of God

(Amos 8:11). But, God has promised there will be a spring of water in the valley – a pool of water in the desert (Is 41:8). You could travel out into Eastern NM or West TX – to pray in the desert. I say you don't have to travel at all. We are in the midst of a parched and spiritually waterless place already.

The forty days of Lent acknowledge that the powers and worldly principalities have tried to abolish the Word of God from the marketplace, from the institutions and from the conscience of humanity. And at Lent we make our stand: We will pray in this desert. We will believe God for a spring of life-giving water gushing up out of the cracked, dry ground. We will call upon God in Christ to provide for us – and to awaken the hearts of people to turn to the Lord and away from diabolical things.

So, you and I meet Jesus in the wilderness of Judea. Even still wet from the waters of His baptism, Scripture says the Holy Spirit drove Him (KJV) out into the wilderness. But, the Spirit is not some taxi driver who stops and drops Jesus off in the middle of nowhere. The Spirit is with

Him the whole time. We humans usually do not choose the way of discipline. We want to partake of the good things of life, but leave trials and testing for somebody else. Jesus was obedient to God's calling to undergo the discipline of testing.

Our Savior, Jesus Christ, knew that He would be facing persecution, suffering and an unjust death. He could not have taken on the cross had He not practiced His faith – allowing even Satan to come and tempt Him. Untested faith will fold and utterly collapse in times of challenge from the forces of evil. As we meet Jesus in the wilderness, we can watch as He faces the tempter. “Use Your divine power to change stone into bread to quell Your hunger,” says the devil. Jesus answers him with the Word of God. Then old Satan says, “Bow down and worship me and I will make you the most powerful man on earth.” Again, Jesus quotes the Bible. Finally, the Accuser says, “Call on God's power to miraculously save You, according to His promises, from plummeting to Your death.” Jesus replies, “It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Jesus resisted all Satan's tempting.

Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, completed the forty days with strengthened faith and trust in His heavenly Father.

So may you willingly and joyfully journey through the wilderness of Lent – meditating upon God’s Word. May your faith and love be strengthened every day you pray in the desert. Amen.