

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2: 12-18; Psalm 51; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:20; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Every Christmas cactus I have ever owned blooms at all times of the year except? ...yes, Christmas! Has your life ever seemed that way? ...out of sync with the rest of the world? For example, while last Lent didn't seem like Lent, have not the last eleven months seemed like an interminable Lent?

I hardly expect many of us this year really want to enter into Lent. The year has been filled with frustrations, fears, isolation & fatigue. Reflecting on our sinfulness and even God's mercy – *“By the way, God, where have you been this past year?”* Add to the mix our personal, family and economic issues and Lent by any definition hardly seems to be on anyone's agenda. Are we agreed?

But there is a difference.

The last eleven months were imposed on us.

The next six weeks are an invitation offered us.

In the experience of this past year we had no choice.

In the next six weeks we are given a choice.

Over the last eleven months,

how many of us have been fighting governmental and medical disciplines?

Over the next six weeks we are invited to freely give ourselves over to Lent's disciplines.

Perspective and attitude make all the difference. And despite the underside of this past year, I continue to believe the pandemic has held within it wonderful hidden gifts that many people regrettably may not have recognized. The season of Lent, on the other hand, boldly proclaims in its liturgical texts that this sacred season is a gracious gift given to us by God; a sacred time filled with joy. Yes, joy.

Joy is at the heart of everything in the Christian life, and Lent is no exception.

Today we heard Jesus condemn sadness. *“When you fast, do not look sad and depressed; gloomy like the hypocrites...”* Orthodox priest, Fr. Thomas Hopko writes, *“Sadness for Christians is a sin to be repented of – not a virtue to be cultivated”*. The 16th-century Carmelite nun and reformer, Saint Teresa of Ávila, put it succinctly when she said, *“A sad nun is a bad nun”*. Therefore the implied corollary, *“A sad Christian is a bad Christian”*. Thus Teresa prayed, *“God save us from gloomy saints!”* For gloomy saints, in the words of Jesus, are hypocrites.

Now regret and sadness over our personal sins and mourning the tragedies of this fallen world is necessary. The gift of joy does not remove Christians from the full spectrum of human experience. But it does mean that we approach life from a particular perspective. The perspective of hope and joy in God. Thus Jesus orders us to hide our sorrow for sin, *“brush your hair, anoint your head and wash your face...”* so that to the world we appear shining and bright.*

Reflecting the spirit of Pope Francis, he began his first encyclical letter** to the Church with, *“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.”* *“Joy...fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.”* The next six weeks is not an invitation into a season of disciplines that are to be endured and then cast off with relief but an opportunity to encounter the living Jesus Christ and know the joy that arises from that relationship. This is a time to deepen a friendship with Jesus or for some Christians, maybe the first time to really meet Jesus.

Francis therefore invites *“all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting [Jesus] encounter [us]. “Those who accept [Jesus’] offer of salvation,”* Francis continues, *“are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness”*. Free from sadness, inner emptiness and loneliness! Lent is the antidote to the last eleven months of pandemic!

Joy is a result of our relationship with Jesus Christ. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. And Paul urges us not to receive this gift of God in vain. For I suspect this gift has a hidden agenda. If we are to be ambassadors for Christ drawing people to God, what kind of ambassadors would you want? Sad ones?

Might God be poking some fun at our traditions since this year as ashes will be sprinkled in the ancient tradition on the crowns of our heads? No big black crosses on our foreheads to show off and compare this year! No one will know we are Christians seeking forgiveness and wholeness except by the joy and hope that we express for life and each other.

So like my Christmas cacti, bloom with great beauty, share the joy of the Gospel and your friendship with Jesus Christ, no matter what time of the year or season of life it is.

**The Lenten Spring*, by Thomas Hopko, Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983, pages 12-13.

**Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, 24 November 2013.

PLEASE NOTE: Homilies presented here are also being videotaped and put up on the Saint Mary, Oneonta website: <http://www.SMCCOneonta.org>.