

## Senses of Lent

- Welcome, brothers, to the desert paradise of Lent. My talk tonight will be about experiencing the spiritual benefits of Lent as we might experience anything else using our five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.
- It may seem odd to you that I would describe the desert of Lent as a paradise, but I have discovered early during this Lent that there is so much to be enjoyed during this sacrificial season. I had not fully appreciated this in past cycles of the liturgical year.
- We traditionally enter into Lent with self-imposed sacrifices and a heightened awareness of the need to be generous with the resources and gifts we've been blessed with. Through our fasting and almsgiving we anticipate experiencing a degree of suffering that will allow us to somehow be brought closer to Jesus, as if in solidarity with his suffering for 40 days and nights in the desert and his timeless suffering during his Passion.
- We enter into this season prayerfully, considering and hoping for the spiritual benefits of this self-imposed exile from a few creature comforts of our normal lifestyles. We are prepared to grit through some inconveniences and discomforts for a mere 40 days to realize spiritual growth and an improved perspective for being a disciple of Christ.
- We anticipate that the sufferings and reflections of Lent will build up in us a spiritual energy so as to magnify our appreciation and celebration of Christ's Resurrection throughout the Easter Season.
- These are the weighty thoughts that I have typically carried into my Lenten experiences for the past several years. For many Catholics, these cerebral efforts are not necessary as they approach their sacrifices of the season with maybe a more pure faith that they will realize the spiritual benefits hoped for.

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- The start of *this* Lenten season has been noticeably different for me. I have eased into Lent completely at peace and with no concern for what I would do differently for Lent. My transition into the desert was immediate, and it felt so natural. In my relaxed state of mind and spirit I have begun experiencing the benefits of Lent right away.
- I realized this at Mass on Ash Wednesday when Father Kelly initially announced the collection for St. Vincent DePaul that would soon follow. I immediately asked myself how much of the large wad of cash I had put in my wallet the day before that I would sacrifice.
- Even before he asked us to empty our wallets, I had decided to give until it hurts; so I decided to give it all. I did have to think about it. It wasn't a natural or easy thing to do. But this was a good experience. My family's usual weekly offering is an electronic bank transfer, and I never have to think about it normally.

- This decision to give away all of that bank roll smelled good to me. It smelled like the strong, tangy aroma of mesquite wood found in the desert. It is noticeably different than the sweet smell of decaying oak leaves and pine needles, which I eventually take for granted when raking my back yard.

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- The next spiritual benefit I realized was during a Friday reflection on our fasting that day and on Ash Wednesday. While my stomach was growling on both days, I easily mastered the urge to have negative thoughts about this suffering.
- I considered all those people in the world who experience hunger every day. Some of these people live within a few miles of me. I offered my discomfort to the Lord as a means to somehow maybe comfort these people.
- I focused my mind on the yard work in front of me. I marveled at the energy I still had to work late into Friday afternoon up to the full meal I enjoyed at our fish fry that evening.
- I did stop briefly in early afternoon to have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; the only food I had consumed up to that point since dinner the night before. It was probably the best tasting peanut butter and jelly sandwich I ever remember eating.
- These periods of fasting on Wednesday and Friday tasted as refreshing as a single gulp of fresh desert spring water on a sweltering hot day. The sparseness of this single gulp was more refreshing than the quarts of ice water I consume out of our kitchen on a typical day.

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- On Saturday, I saw spiritual benefits reflected in the changing nature of my personal prayers with God. As I've grown closer to God, I have found myself uttering quick prayers of thanksgiving, petitions, and sometimes sorrow depending on what I am encountering.
- I have been having a hard time lately with longer, deeper contemplative prayers. These were the types of prayers I relied on to begin my friendship with God. These prayers were filled with very personal consolations that I would experience during long, quiet times with our Lord. I miss these experiences.
- I tried to reconnect with God in this way on Saturday morning. As hard as I tried, my mind did not remain focused. My head was filled with thoughts of the work I was doing for others, my St. Vincent DePaul home visits, and spiritual readings and writings I had recently initiated.
- I was not focused long enough to hear any specific message from God to me. Yet I did not feel disappointed. With every unintended random thought or memory, I was feeling that warmth in my heart that I know comes only from God.
- It was as if he was telling me that the significant activities of my life lately are filled with his presence. I couldn't have been happier in seeing that through my prayer with him.

- It was as if I had just set eyes upon the beauty of the rich yellow petals of the Golden Suncup flowers or the deep royal Blue Sage erupting out of the desert floor among the scattered boulders. The day-to-day activities and short prayers now scattered throughout the landscape of my life are blanketed with the beauty of his love.
- This vision also brings me renewed appreciation for the pervasive Oxeye Daisies and Black Eyed Susans that I had been ignoring along the roads and empty lots of my neighborhood.

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- Again, I felt the wonder of Lent on Sunday evening as I finally sat down to call my Dad after a very busy weekend. Neither my Dad nor I are natural conversationalists. We both always relied on my Mom's outgoing personality to carry us through conversations during my weekly phone calls to them. Since she passed away, my phone calls to check on my Dad sometimes seem a little forced and clumsy.
- This past Sunday, I didn't have a lot of mental energy left for a phone call to my Dad, so I quickly asked God for the focus and strength to have a meaningful conversation with Dad. God didn't disappoint.
- My Dad and I spoke for over 40 minutes about a lot of inconsequential things as well as great shared memories. We laughed heartily at some memories and shared solemn concerns for my brother who chooses to live in poverty. The conversation was comforting and relaxing.
- It felt so good, like sitting under the cool protective shade of an Ironwood tree in the midst of what appears to be a hot and forlorn desert. I appreciated it more than all the shade of the numerous pine and oak trees that surround my house, offering their sporadic shade on hot, humid afternoons.

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- Earlier this week I went on a St. Vincent DePaul home visit with another disciple of Christ to give a neighbor a needed piece of furniture. We have made numerous visits to this man before. He has been going through a very prolonged, rough time. He is in poor health physically, mentally and spiritually and is understandably negative about almost everything.
- He likes to talk, though. He has a bit of an ego, but at the same time, he is having a hard time coming to terms with his suffering. He seems to blame everyone else from the government to his neighbors for his troubles, when actually it is his very risky and unhealthy lifestyle that causes his problems.
- My fellow Vincentian and I strategized about what we could say to him and how we could involve him in taking responsibility for resolving some of his problems. We also prayed to God for help with listening to and guiding our neighbor in need.
- When we arrived, our neighbor in need was very upbeat and positive for a change. He had just returned from an appointment with a new primary health care provider. She listened

carefully to him and gave him hope that his numerous medical issues could be diagnosed, understood and treated.

- We celebrated this good news with our neighbor and encouraged him to build on this good news. We were able to dissuade him from turning negative on other issues during our very long conversation with him. We left this man with the understanding that God loves him and will strengthen him in his efforts to shake his bad habits and return to a responsible path of life.
- When we left, our neighbor was much more positive about his future and his intentions to reform. This was a surprising and most welcome new sound.
- It was like hearing the crisp, shrill call of a Cactus Wren flitting about the thorny cactuses of the desert. It was a new sound that brought more cheer than the ever-present twitter of chickadees and cardinals in my back yard. God had certainly blessed us with his presence among us during that visit.

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- I have shared with you five spiritual blessings that have tantalized my senses in just the first week of Lent. I am looking forward to the entirety of Lent.
- The gifts of the Spirit are bountiful because of the sufferings, prayers and reflections we enter into during Lent. We are not meant to store up these spiritual benefits until the end of Lent. These gifts are meant to be enjoyed and shared as we go through Lent and beyond.
- I am also looking forward to using my sharpened senses throughout the rest of the liturgical year, appreciating God's continuous presence in all the thoughts and activities of life.
- While Lent prepares us to rise to new life with Jesus, it also helps us to sense how he is continuously present with us in all things.
- No matter the frustrations, temptations, or trials of life; no matter who we encounter or what is expected from us by others or ourselves, we are never alone on our journey through this life.
- If God can give us a sense of paradise during the suffering season of Lent, imagine the boundless joy we can experience and share from the rest of our walk with God through this life.
- Brothers, receive this joy-filled gift of foresight into Paradise and share it with all who are open to receiving it from you. Thank you!

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett