

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jan 14th 2016

This is not a particularly encouraging first reading. My most difficult times are the periods where God seems to be absent. In the reading from Samuel, the Israelites are facing defeat. They call on God for assistance. God seems to be silent. We may see these experiences as ways of God testing us, as ways to humble us, or as ways to help us grow. The Israelites have the same question that I tend to have in such moments, namely, "Did God abandon us?" This can lead to spiral of spiritual depression. We can lose our ability to see the wonder around us, in the moments when we decide that it may not be worth the effort of looking. The Israelites finish today's reading in defeat. The subsequent text will reveal God's presence in support of his people, but the people will have doubts until the Lord's intervention on their behalf is clear and steadfast.

The curing of the leper comes at the end of the same chapter in which Jesus is tempted in the desert. The desert experience is a time of isolation, difficulty and challenge. When alone in this experience, it becomes a personal test. It can be the beginning of new path as it was in Jesus life, but it can also degenerate into despair.

These experiences bring us to our knees in many ways. The precipitating incidents may involve grief, a betrayal, an aggression, a personal failure, a trauma, a failed support network, or even a hormonal imbalance.

I can commiserate with the Psalmist. I, too, can call out in the darkness hoping to be heard. The Psalmist is defeated, but does not give up his relationship with God. The leper in today's Gospel does not give up. He comes to Jesus with hope.

My experience has been that these periods of desolation have almost always led me in a new direction, in ways that I would not have considered in times when things were running smoothly. As a strong willed person I am usually a better listener and more reflective when I am in a vulnerable position. The resulting new paths have generally led to times of renewed growth and have generally been for the better.

My prayer today is for a recognition of the gifts that difficult challenges may bring.

Dear Lord,

We ask ourselves, "How can You let difficulties fall on Your people?"
You gave us Your example in Your temptation in the desert,
but we all do not have the same strength as our Lord and Savior.
Give us hope and the will to persevere.

Protect us from despair
and let us never lose the willingness to call out to You in the darkness.
Give us the insight to recognize the prospects that challenges may bring
and the strength to move forward with new opportunities.
Above all, help us never to lose the sense of the wonder of this world
and of Your presence in it.

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