

1st Sunday Lent    Year B        March 1, 2009

It's Lent! For 46 weeks of the year, we try to fix the world--or at least complain about it. But for the six weeks that began on Ash Wednesday, we Christians are encouraged to look inward and confront the disorder in our own lives. It's not easy. The issues within us can be very difficult. And very frightening.

Jesus was driven into the desert--the opposite of the Garden of Eden, and for forty days he was among "wild beasts." It turns out that the wild animals in that area would have been jackals and mountains lions. There are no jackals in the US, but they are sort of like a coyote; a jackal in that desert with Jesus would have eaten birds, rabbits, things like that.

But the other "wild beast" in that desert with Jesus was mountain lions. Mountain lions are hunters: they ambush their prey. Usually it's a deer or smaller, but a big mountain lion can kill a moose. A male can weigh 200 pounds. Hiking in New Mexico, I learned that if you should never run from a mountain lion; you have to face it and usually it will turn away. But they are killers: it's rare for a mountain lion to attack a human, but if it does, local people ask only one question: did the victim survive?

Jesus was forty days in the desert with wild and dangerous beasts. It's one thing to give up chocolate or beer or texting or video games during Lent. *It's quite another to bravely encounter the particular mountain lion in our heart, stare it in the eye and say by Easter, "I will drive you away."* [pause]

Actually, we really can't. Our flaw is deep and powerful, and--like a mountain lion--it will probably always be lurking in the shadows.

Well, what can we do during Lent? Jesus told us, "Repent, and believe in the gospel." And what is the gospel? It is so simple: God is on our side. When Adam and Eve and everybody else turned away, God did not condemn the world. God sent Jesus to save it--by his life, death, resurrection, and Holy Spirit. We don't fix the evil in our lives: Jesus does. God is merciful and forgiving.

Think of the rainbow in the first reading. After the great flood, God said to Noah, I am making a covenant with you: never again will I destroy all the people and animals in a flood. And every time I, God, see a rainbow, I will remember that promise. And on planet earth, there's probably always a rainbow somewhere, and God sees it and takes pity.

Lent is not a season to ignore, as if we are perfect and it's everyone else who is so awful. And there is no great point in fasting from chocolate or alcohol if we are not also willing to give up whatever the wild animal is deep our hearts. But it is also not time to hang our heads in fear and discouragement at our weaknesses. Jesus understands temptation, he loves us and is there to help us. And we have a place to turn: He has given us the Sacrament of Reconciliation.