

### **Third Sunday in Lent, March 23, 2025**

God's self-revelation to Moses and the burning bush reminds me very much of an analogy that was used by Saint John of the Cross in his very famous work, *The Dark Night of the Soul* in which he does not exactly depict God as this fire on a bush but rather he uses the example of a burning log to describe how God's grace transforms us in the course of our Christian life. And as the burning bush on Mount Horeb was not consumed, we learned that the fire of the Holy Spirit that burns in each of us does not annihilate us. It does not destroy us as some might fear that the fire of God would do but rather it transforms us. In St. John's example, in his analogy, he speaks about different things that happen to the log of wood as it is brought into the fire, or the fire is applied to it so to speak.

He says the first thing it does is it drives out all the moisture. Very true. By introducing a log that has some moisture in it into the fire, the fire is going to dry it out, the fire expels from the log everything that is contrary to fire. He says very much the same thing happens as God works on us. The first thing He does before really transforming us into Himself, He has to drive out from us all that is contrary to Him. So, all that is diametrically opposed to God, grave sins, you know wherever sin is deeply seated in our life, the divine purifying fire of God comes and drives that out. Secondly, he says, "The fire gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly and even causes it to emit a bad odor." He says, "In the soul, this is the stage where the soul's ugliness, or the effects of sin on the soul, all that is dark in the soul, is brought to the fore." So, it's not necessarily that this person is still struggling with grave sins, they have rounded that corner if you will, but now they see the ugliness of sin. He says, "Thus what seems worse than before and unsightly and abominable, in any case, the Lord is bringing to the surface all in the

soul that still needs to be surrendered and transformed.” And then of course the third stage is where the fire transforms the log of wood into itself. Although the wood is still wood, we know, but it takes on all of the characteristics of the fire. “It is dry, and it dries. It is hot, and it gives off heat. It is brilliant, and it illumines.” So, in a sense what he is saying is that as the fire transforms the wood, the wood becomes more and more like fire. And so it is in our journey of transformation in God's grace that not only are things that are diametrically opposed to God in our life, not only are those driven out and then not only the littler things, the finer details, morals and such, those are transformed but then we are made more and more like in love, in charity, in goodness and in joy.

This is what is on offer to us from God. A complete transformation in not only freedom from sin but also transformation in Him that we participate as fully as a human being can participate in divine life. We don't become gods on our own of course but we are so united with God through His transforming grace that we take on His characteristics very much. This is what we are made for. This is what our God is offering to each one of us.

If we turn to the Gospel today, we find that there is a certain urgency of how we will respond to this call. In the parable, in the second part of the Gospel, Jesus speaks of a fig tree and the owner of the of the orchard comes along and sees this tree has borne no fruit in three years, so he is ready to cut it down. He asks, “Why should it exhaust the soil?” The gardener, who is Jesus acting on our behalf, replies, “Leave it for this year also. I will cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future.” He says, “If not, you can cut it down.”

The matter of conversion, the matter of responding to the Lord's invitation into this purifying fire, this transforming fire, this matter is an urgent one. It is not something that we should dilly dally about, but the purpose of the Gospel is not to scare us into responding to the invitation, either. It is not that in our spiritual life we should always just be so afraid of the fires of hell that we should do what's right. That's not the best motivation. If that is what it takes at certain points in life then that is okay, but the Lord wants us to be drawn and attracted by the prospect of union with Him as that is the greatest good that we can ever attain.

When I was in grade school and high school, I was in 4H and I showed sheep each year. I think it was about nine years that I took a sheep to the fair each year. And, of course, one of the things that a kid learns when showing sheep is how to deal with the animal. I tried to tame the animal by putting a halter on the head and you could pull and pull and pull and pull and that sheep would not move! No matter how hard you pull on the sheep's head to try to lead it someplace, it will not budge. But if you put your hand right on its docked tail and put a little pressure there, sheep don't like that, and sometimes they will bolt forward. So, it is kind of like a 'go' button. You have to be careful where to put your hand there, but eventually you get the hang of it after a while. So, the sheep moves when there's something it doesn't like happening to it. You know there's some little bit of pain that it experiences in that. But we don't want to be like that in because we only move because we want to avoid something bad. We want to be drawn to the Lord, we want to be so attracted by the prospect of union with him that we advance willingly and part ways with our sin - willingly, eagerly so that our friendship with Him can grow. Again, that is the journey of Lent. Life in general, yes, but especially during Lent.

This is the time we have set aside to take a good look at our lives, a good look at our relationship with the Lord and perhaps that image of the burning log can help all of us. Maybe the Lord is still driving from us those things that are incompatible with friendship with Him. Maybe it is finer tuning. He is ridding us of the little imperfections and faults or the venial sins and maybe we are on the path of transformation into that divine fire. Wherever we are on that journey it is okay, the Lord is at work. But in this Lent, we have an opportunity to devote ourselves, again, not out of fear but out of love, to walk on the path with deeper friendship with our loving Lord.