

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

“I have come to rescue them.”

Fr. John Burns

Hey everyone. I'm Father John Burns, and I'm happy to be back with you on this, the third Sunday of Lent, as we continue our journey toward Easter through the very rich, rich season of Lent. So, let's begin today with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Gracious God, we have behind us a part of this journey, and we have before us the other part. We acknowledge in humility and gratitude to You that we are on the way. That You call us toward Yourself, You call us toward Yourself, especially year after year after year, to the very rich season of Lent so that we recognize our abundant need for You. And that we would imitate the pattern You have established for us so that, returning to You with our whole hearts, our lives would be as full as they are meant to be. And so, Lord God, we call out to You as we begin this time together asking for the gift and the grace of inspiration. That You would open our hearts and our minds to a fuller grasp of the life to which You call us, and the way You call us there. Lead us always, in all things, through Christ, our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's good to be back with you my friends. I've been praying for you this entire time. And as we jump in now to the third week of Lent, again we have very powerful scriptures before us that the church invites us to pray with. And I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that I'd come back to this idea of story, and I want to bring that up with you here. Everybody loves a good story, you know. Like we grow up telling stories to our children, and hearing them from our parents. That story is something really important about human existence. There really is no way to imagine living without stories, because stories tell us something about a series of events that are all related one to another. Imagine if you didn't have your own story. Imagine if one day you woke up in your bed and had no idea where this house was that you're living in, and how you got there, and what you're supposed to do next. Imagine if all you had was that single moment, without any context of what got you there and where it's supposed to go. It would be utterly confusing.

And then if someone comes into the room and says "Give me \$100 please right now." You'd be like "What on earth is going? Who is this? And I don't understand." But if you place all the details around it, your story, you realize that your son is about to go back to school and he owes \$100, and that's him who's standing in your bedroom asking you for the \$100 you said last night you'd give

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him, and on and on and on. You see, as we put details around a story, single events make sense. Stories help to bring about a connection, from event to event to event, that helps us understand where we came from and where we're headed.

And we're in the middle of a story, and many other stories within that story. Right now we're in the middle of a journey toward Easter, and that journey is situated in a series of these talks that you're listening to and praying with during Lent, and this broader Lenten journey is a movement toward Easter as a church situated in the fact that we are Catholics, and that we Catholics come from a particular and a long and a beautiful story, and it's the story of the people Israel. I referenced a little bit of that in the first Sunday of Lent, but I want to raise that back up.

Because if we don't understand that part of our story: how God acts toward us, how He has established us, what He has done to bring us the Old Covenant and now the New. If we don't grasp all of that, then it's very easy for us to look at a single thing - like a scripture passage, or a word from the Lord, or something we hear in our faith - without a lot of context, and we don't really know what to do with it, and so we react in kind of a strange way and say "What on earth is this?" And "I'll cast it aside."

When we situate these things in their details, we understand them and we know what to do about them. And our life as Catholics is situated in the story of the people Israel. As we look through the scriptures, especially the first five books in the Bible and then the prophets, we learn a ton about God. And there's no way that we're going to go into those details here, but Lent is always rooted, because of this desert reality that I talked about a couple of weeks ago, it's always rooted in Israel's movement toward the desert, away from sin in Egypt. And in the desert to struggling with their own sinfulness, something, as I said last time, that Christ overcame by facing the tempter. But as Israel's out in the desert, over and over again they experienced a ton of trials. They turned away from the Lord over and over again, they didn't have food, they didn't have drink, and constantly the Lord came to their aid.

It's a first drawn out example to us that reminds us of who we are as God's people, that we are always protected, that we are always guided by, and that we are deeply beloved to a perfect Heavenly Father. But our tendency, which is the tendency we see all throughout the Old Testament, is to forget about that. In particular, it's to forget who God is, what He's done for us, and how He's calling us to celebrate those things and, through those things, return to Him more fully. Which is why we have Lent, as I said a couple of weeks ago, over and over again. We just forget about God. We get lost in the world, and at times we think the things of the world are way more important than they actually are, and so we need to be shaken awake to realize that the things of the earth are gifts, fruits of creation designed and made

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by a perfect and loving God. But they can never displace Him, and they can never hold our attention so long that we forget about God and wander off.

The story of Israel all through the Old Testament is precisely that. It's wandering off, which is also our story, which is why Lent begins with a call to return. As we look at the scriptures from this weekend, in a particular way, this very beautiful moment where the Lord tells Israel, through the prophets, about what He's doing, that the Lord is constantly reminding us through His prophetic word, as through the historical books of the bible, that He is coming to get us. The word that's actually used in the book of Exodus, today this first reading, is ***I have come to rescue***, the Lord says.

But the story, our story, our origin lies in the fact that we were in need. We had gotten lost. We had gotten confused. We had wandered off. And time and again, the Lord is faithful to what He says right here, which is that He comes out to rescue us. This is a very, very important word for us to sit with today and throughout Lent, but really throughout our lives. To remember that when we find ourselves confused and lost and meandering and even without hope, we're not always the ones who are supposed to find the way back on our own, nor are we, as I said previously, supposed to do all of the battling on our own. It is the Lord who comes to seek us, and we must respond in love to Him who has loved us first. ***I have come to rescue them***, the Lord says. That is at the foundation of our story. We needed to be rescued, and God rescued us. We need to be rescued, and God longs to rescue us.

Now, the second reading, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it with you today, but if you go back and read these things, Paul is doing something that see all throughout the prophets, as well as all throughout the New Testament: He's just retracing parts of the story, telling a little bit about what happened to Israel, how they got lost, and how God saved them over and over again, recounting His mighty deeds, giving testimony to the work of the rescuer, explaining in a united testimonial form how God acts toward us, and how magnificent it is that over and over again, even though often it's our fault that we would get so lost, He calls us back and He is the one who so often comes to get us.

We hear Jesus speak about that of course in the parable of The Lost Sheep, The Prodigal Son, The Lost Coin. It's all over Christ's fullness of preaching, the way that God wants to rescue us. But in the middle of Lent, as we sit in this desert time and we're beginning to recognize, hopefully more deeply, the fact that we need rescuing, and the fact that we have wandered off a lot, because Lent brings us face-to-face with our own sinfulness as we're called to conversion. And hopefully, as we're making this journey, we are discovering how lost we really are, because that

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is precisely the opening for us to say “Help me, Lord. I can’t find my way back. I can’t fix these things. I don’t know how to make all of this better.” We face our sinfulness in Lent, and acknowledge our need.

Now, facing our sinfulness is essential, because if we don’t get this right, we know that there is a cost. It’s really easy, and we all know this I think, to soft-pedal the gospel. To curb everything, and make it soft and gentle, and wrap things in kind language that at times actually lulls us into being lukewarm. This gospel is one of the places where we see Jesus calling us out of that lukewarmness, and really shaking us awake with a very strong reminder that there is a cost to not repenting. And I just point out, I’m not going to read the whole passage to you, but the Lord says, and He says it twice: ***I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish.*** If you do not repent, you will all perish.

That’s a hard word, you know, and we have to put that into the context of the broader story. Again, why stories and context matter. If we just hone in on that word, we’re like “Okay God, what kind of God are You if You would allow me to perish?” But what Christ is getting at is that if we don’t turn away from our sin, that means we’re choosing to stay away from God. That means we’re choosing the world over God. That means we are delighting in the dry and dusty treats of the desert instead of coming back to the Lord, who offers us a way, an oasis, who offers us the fruits of eternal life. If we don’t make that choice to turn away from whatever in the world has held our gaze too long, then we will perish. There is a cost to not turning back to the Lord.

And so we might ask as we read that “Well, what kind of God are You? What kind of God are You?” And we have the answer in the scriptures from the very same set of readings that the church held up to us. What kind of God are we dealing with here? Look back at Psalm 103, which is the Responsorial Psalm. He’s a God who pardons, He’s a God who heals all of your ills, He’s a God who redeems your life from destruction, He crowns you with kindness and compassion, He secures justice, He is merciful, He is gracious, He is slow to anger, He is abounding in kindness. This is a good God. This is a very good God, a surpassingly good God. This is the God of gods, who is perfect. And yet, in His perfection, He’s created something so beautiful, the human heart, that He has left it free after His own pattern. Meaning that we are not impeded from doing whatever we please, which at times includes rejecting the immense superlative surpassing gifts of God.

So God is all of these things, and all of these things are, as it were, metaphorically on the heart of God for us, that we would know His mercy and His justice, His compassion, His kindness, His care, His redemption, His healing. But the Psalm gives us a little bit of a clue that connects us to the gospel. It also says that we

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cannot forget all His benefits. And that all of these conditions that it names, this a listing of the way that God acts toward those who fear Him. And those are very important and rather humbling attitudes that I think our secular culture, our contemporary world doesn't really like. We don't like the idea of fearing anything, especially not fearing God, and sometimes we don't really want to give God credit for what He's done.

On the first, on fearing God, we're not actually talking about the kind of fear that we know is vicious and causes us to be cowards. Fear of God just denotes a healthy respect for the fact that He is the Lord and we are not, despite the way we tend to act, and despite the way our world tells us we ought to act. That a healthy fear of God says "You have given me everything Lord, and You can take it away at the drop of a penny." And so we fear God, we respect and we reverence, we stand in wonder and awe and, as it were, that unlocks the heart of God, or that opens the way to our participation in these attributes that the Psalm gives to us. If we don't fear God, it means we think of Him as an equal, and that means we aren't going to experience His kindness, His mercy, His compassion, His healing goodness because we're telling Him that we don't need it.

Lent is supposed to be this jostling awake of just that reality. That our tendency is to tell God that we will work side-by-side. That we'll come to Him when it's convenient, that we'll give Him a little bit of our gifts and blessings, but most of the time we're on our own. We grapple with our independency, our tendency away from God, and in so doing we close off the sweetness and the fruitfulness and the blessings of a life with God. This is a very serious time to awaken, to arise from our slumber, which is why we have that really challenging gospel passage. That if we don't repent, we will all perish. We repent by turning away from our sin. We fear God, healthy and respectful and wondrous fear of God, and we recount our blessings. Those are on either side of that Psalm.

So, a good practice for today and for this week: Ask yourself about your own wonder and awe. Your respect, your fear of God. Do you really treat the Lord as the Lord, who has Lordship over all of your affairs? Quiet, public, hidden, secret, everything. Is the Lord the Lord of all of that? Do you truly recognize that if you don't repent you will perish? And while that carries with it a tone of fear-inducing kind of intimidation, it's meant to be a wakeup call, as all of Lent is meant to be. It's time for us to wake up. And when we look out at our world you guys, man, how often do we see the fruits of living according to the flesh? We see the culture of death all around us, and we see the world literally falling apart. And it really is as simple as to say that if the entire world turned toward the Lord, all of this would be abolished. All of this would fall away, because it is the Lord's great and burning longing that every human being would know Him and love Him and return to Him

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with their whole hearts from whatever has pulled them away. And so we intercede for that. We strive to be converted in our own hearts, but we also beg the Lord to, by grace and by intervention, rescue. To rescue those who have wandered off, because this is a great season of coming back to where we belong so that we would not perish. What kind of God is this? A good God. But we can perish if we're not careful.

The beauty of the way that gospel continues is that it doesn't end in this harsh word, although it doesn't end in the sweetest word either. Jesus gives the parable of the fig tree that has not borne fruit for 3 years, and the master comes and he says "Cut it down, it's wasting the energy of the soil." But this other man intervenes and he goes "Give it another year. I'll take care of it, and maybe it will bear fruit. If it doesn't then we can cut it down, but let's try again." It's a parable about the patience of God, but there is a cost. The tree will be cut down if it doesn't bear fruit. Our lives will end, and if they are fruitless, then we'll perish. But the Lord is patient, and His patience, the scriptures tell us, is directed to our salvation. And so in the face of looking at our sins and recognizing how much we really do have to repent from, and how much sin there really is, and how much we have chosen the world over the Lord, how much we carry with us. Wherever there is discouragement there, we also hear the beautiful patience of God. "Give it some time. Sir, leave it for this year. Let's see. Let's see if it bears fruit."

God's patience is such an inspiration to us in the way that we ought to act toward others. Because, time and time again, we abolish His gifts, we throw away what He gives to us, we are ungrateful. Like Israel, we wander off forgetting His blessings, and no longer fearing the one who has full lordship over everything, including the breath of life. And yet He is patient, and He calls us to that same kind of patience in the way we treat one another.

As we look to the Lord in this Lenten season, and we acknowledge that our hearts are broken, that our lives are falling apart, all of our lives, and that we are mired in sin, and yet burning in us is a deeper desire to repent, a deeper desire for the fullness of life, we turn to the Lord and we ask for the grace to experience a full conversion, a metanoia. That's the Greek origin of the word "repent," or "return," or "convert," and it means a transformative change of mind, and it means that everything changes. That as we turn back to the Lord and away from the world that has occupied our gaze, we don't just look back at God, but we rather say "I now am related to You differently."

Grace always has the power to change us. This weekend, as the church holds up to us these readings, and holds up to us that challenging word, that if we do not repent we will perish, we're actually invited to think about our own death, and to assess

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our lives keenly aware that we are not here forever. That in the Lord's patience, more time is given, but not all time. The Lord comes out to us and waits and says "I would like to see you do better, and I will help you. If I hold against you all of the weight of your sin, you will perish. If you do not come back to Me, you will perish. I am merciful, and I want you with Me. I want to rescue you from what will otherwise destroy you."

You see, Lent is actually, as strange as it can be, a season to consider death. Think about Ash Wednesday. What's the point of the ashes? Ashes are the fruit of something that has been destroyed, has died. We have burned the palms and we sprinkle them in our hair or we cross our forehead with them as a sign that we are dust, and onto dust we shall return. We can't get around it. Even though our culture and our world, we hate to talk about this, and in our own hearts we don't want to think about it, we are going to die, and very likely before we would like to die. And so Lent calls us to stand before that fact and say "Am I ready?"

None of us can say that we are fully ready, but it is the Lord's good way to pull us back to Himself, to invite us to pray more fully, to fast with greater fervor, and to give alms to aid the heart in returning more fully to the Lord. So that whenever that day comes, we would be prepared to stand before our God and say "Lord, it hasn't been perfect, and I thank You for Your patience, but I have done as best I could". Let us beg for that grace, brothers and sisters, that this season would go deep, maybe deeper than any season has before. That it would touch the very, very foundations of our existence, and we would know a metanoia, a change of mind. That as we turn back to the Lord, something would change in us. That we would have this story behind us, and we would never return to it. That our way would become a way of fidelity, a way of deep faith and hope and love practiced through all of the virtues, through the life of charity, through the goodness to which God calls us, who is patient with us, but knows the time is running out. And so He calls us to Himself, coming to us as a rescuer, and inviting us to return. Let us pray.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good and loving God, we come before the reality of our mortality in this season, on this day, in this time, and we beg You for the gift of encouragement and the gift of zeal. That You would infuse into our hearts the graces we need to face the temptations that come before us, and to know that we do so with the aid and the example and the gift of Your Son. Heavenly Father, by the spirit poured out upon us, encourage us in these ways, that keenly aware that we can do better, and keenly aware that You are patient with us and that You come to rescue us. We ask You to help us now, today, take seriously the fact of our mortality. To celebrate the gift of the time that remains, and to promise, in grace, to make the best use of all that is before us. We ask this through the intercession of the most beautiful and immaculate Heart of

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Mary, cause of our joy. Pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God bless you everyone. I'm praying for you.