

Well if you notice, today's Gospel from Mark is a much shorter account of Jesus' 40 days in the desert when He is tempted by Satan as compared to the other synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Luke which provide us with more specific details and a much longer account of the temptations of Jesus. The fact that Mark's account of Jesus' 40 days in the desert is much shorter than Matthew and Luke's is indicative of the fact that of the four Gospels, Mark's is the shortest Gospel. And not only is Mark's Gospel the shortest of the four, but it's also the earliest of the Gospels, written sometime between 60-69 AD. Since Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, one could say that Mark's Gospel is essentially the "Cliffnotes" version of Jesus' life and public ministry, where the evangelist writes in a streamlined fashion, providing summaries rather than lengthy, specific details.

Regardless of Mark's narrative style, he found it necessary to tell the mysterious story of Jesus' 40 days in the desert when He was tempted by Satan, a story that at some point in His life, Jesus Himself probably shared with His disciples and Apostles, who in turn shared it

with St. Mark, who was a close companion of St. Peter, and possibly St. Peter's personal scribe. So even though St. Mark wasn't one of the 12 Apostles and may not have been an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Christ, the fact that he was a close companion of St. Peter, the leader of the 12, demonstrates that his short Gospel reflects the eyewitness account of St. Peter.

Now it's important to remember when reading the story of Jesus' temptations in the desert, at the time, the desert was generally known by the Jewish people as a place of struggle, testing, and discipline. The desert has a central role in the Old Testament in that it's where the Israelites first met the Lord and it featured prominently in the Exodus where the Israelites wandered and lived for 40 years. The desert was naturally a place of desolation, but spiritually it was also a place of refuge. It was in the deserts that Israel received the loving protection of the Lord and were invited to live in fidelity and love for the Lord. And so by Jesus entering the desert, this desolate and seemingly lifeless place, to be tempted by Satan and his demons Christ is showing His desire to definitively conquer and defeat the forces of evil. It's in the

desert where our Lord Jesus first fights the devil and demonstrates that the nature of His mission is to once and for all defeat the forces of darkness in order to save us from sin and death. In Jesus' victory over Satan in the desert, our Lord Jesus turns a desolate and lifeless place into a place of victory and life—a place where love reigns supreme! Jesus' victory over Satan in the desert certainly foreshadows His definitive victory over evil through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection!

Brothers and sisters, what are *our* “deserts”? Where are the “deserts” in our soul? What parts of our soul are characterized by spiritual and psychological desolation and fear? Where are those dark, seemingly lifeless and desolate areas of our soul that we don't want anyone to see or know about? If we're honest with ourselves, then we'd admit that we all have areas of our life that we don't want anyone, including God, to know about. We all have areas and parts of our life and soul that we're most embarrassed and ashamed of. Even talking and thinking about this might make us uncomfortable. We may have struggles, fears, wounds, doubts, and past sins that we're so ashamed and embarrassed of and we don't want anyone, including God, to know

about it. We're afraid that if we let God or others see that part of our life, then they won't love us and accept us. We may even think that we're unlovable if we reveal that part of our soul to God or others.

Brothers and sisters, *that is such a lie!*

Make no mistake, the voice that encourages us to hide from God and not share with Him our deepest, darkest struggles, fears, wounds, doubts, and sins is the voice of the devil and his demonic minions—the ones whom Jesus confronted and defeated during His 40 days in the desert. The devil very seductively says, “You can't share that part of your life with God and others! They won't love you if they find out about that! They'll hate you! They'll judge and condemn you! You can't confess that sin to the priest! He'll think you're horrible! He'll think less of you! It's best to keep that hidden from God and others.”

Brothers and sisters, the devil is the greatest liar and accuser who seeks to destroy us through shame and fear. And so many times, we can fall victim to the devil's temptations, suffering in silence, and wallowing in our sins, wounds, fears, doubts, and struggles, acting as if there's nobody who cares, nobody who loves us, and nobody who can help us.

Brothers and sisters, it's *precisely* in those deserts, those dark, desolate places of our soul that we're most afraid to confront where our Lord Jesus wants to love us! It's in those deepest, darkest, desolate places in our life where we struggle, where we suffer, where we fear, where we cower, where we doubt, where we fall—it's *precisely there* where God wants to love us and heal us! It's in those deep dark struggles, those hidden wounds and fears, those parts of our life that we're too afraid to acknowledge, that's *exactly where* our Lord Jesus wants to go and love us! That's where the Lord wants to go to heal us, sanctify us, carry us, and renew us! It's *precisely* in those deserts of our soul, those deep dark areas of our life where our Lord Jesus wants to go bring the saving grace of His victory over evil! Our Lord Jesus wants the power of His victory over evil to permeate our lives, to penetrate to the deepest and darkest depths of our soul so that our whole being can radiate His divine life and light!

The places of *most shame and fear in our life are precisely the places where God wants to most love us!* And so our Lord and Savior encourages us, “Do not be afraid. I love You. Let Me help you. Let Me

carry You. Let Me heal you. Let Me forgive you. Let My mercy wash your sins away. Let Me liberate you.”

Brothers and sisters, whether or not we want to share those internal “deserts” with God, He already knows about them. Given that God is omniscient, meaning that He is all-knowing, *He knows us better than we know ourselves*. And yet He *doesn’t* force Himself upon us. He doesn’t force His way into those “deserts” in our life, those deep, desolate parts of our soul that we don’t want Him to know about—those areas that we don’t like to think about, talk about, or confront. Our loving Father gave us the gift of free will, and so He wants us to invite Him in to those “deserts” so that He can fight for us, forgive us, heal us, and ultimately save us. The Lord, Who is Life itself, can bring life to the lifeless. And so He wants us to freely invite Him in to those desolate and lifeless deserts in our soul so that He can give us new life in Him—a new life of authentic freedom, peace, and joy. *Just as our Lord Jesus entered the Judean desert to fight and conquer the Devil, so He also desires to enter our desert to fight and conquer the Devil.*

The practical ways in which we let God in to those deserts of our life are through prayer, the sacraments (*especially* the Most Holy Eucharist and Confession), good spiritual and human counsel, great spiritual reading, a strong devotion to the Blessed Mother, fasting, penance, and almsgiving. These are the avenues in which God's love permeates the depths of our being and saves us.

You know when Jesus says at the end of today's Gospel to "Repent and believe in the Gospel," a big part of that repentance is turning away from all the evil that prevents us from letting God into the deserts of our soul. To repent means to reject any and all evil that stops us from letting God in and healing us, loving us, and saving us, especially in those deepest, darkest deserts of our life where we don't want Him or anyone else to go.

If you look at the word "Lent" and remove the letter "n," you end up with the word "let." Brothers and sisters, Lent is about *letting* God in—letting God *into* our life, especially into those deserts of our soul where we're afraid, ashamed, and embarrassed. Lent is about "letting go, and letting God." As disciples of Christ, we're called to *let go* of all

that prevents the Lord from entering the deepest, darkest depths of our soul and loving us, healing us, sanctifying us, and liberating us. Lent is about letting go of the evil that separates us from God, so that He can love us in the deserts of our soul.

So on this First Sunday of Lent, as we prepare to worship and receive our Lord Jesus Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist, our Savior Who is the Spring of true Life and the Oasis in the desert, may we ask the Lord for the grace to let go of all that prevents Him from entering into the deepest, darkest, deserts of our soul, so that He can love us, heal us, sanctify us, and ultimately save us.