



# THE ARCHANGEL

## Journey into the Wilderness

Lent 2016

Newsletter of Saint Michael The Archangel Church | Frederick, Maryland

 **ETHOS:** *“Dust thou are, and to dust thou shall return”*

Lent reminds us of the 40 years the Israelis spent wandering in the desert. It is also a commemoration of the 40 days our Lord Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting, praying, being tempted by the devil.

One of the wonderful things about the Lenten season is a sense of being in process. Lent is our springtime of new growth and renewed life. Lent is the season to realize that God is continually creating, that God’s grace is continually moving through us.

We can think of Lent as both a sojourn and a journey. We have two opportunities to identify with Jesus, one at the start of his public ministry and one near the end. The sojourn occurs in the desert as Jesus spends 40 days alone in self-reflection and discernment of God’s way. The journey takes place on the road to Jerusalem as Jesus moves towards his dark destiny. The sojourn causes us to look inward and acknowledge our human and spiritual vulnerabilities; the journey bids us look outward and weigh the costs of discipleship. Both involve turning.

In the solitary sojourn, we turn away from our sins and temptations and toward God and his great mercy. This is otherwise known as repentance. And while we usually don’t put ourselves in a desolate environment for 40 days, we can choose a posture of humility and undertake practices that sharpen our spiritual awareness.

The desert, as we know, is the place where, stripped of all that normally nourishes and supports us, we are exposed to chaos, raw fear, and demons of every kind. In the desert we are exposed body and soul, and made vulnerable to being overwhelmed by chaos and temptation of every kind. But, precisely because we are so stripped of everything we normally rely on, this is also a privileged moment for grace. Why? Because all the defense mechanisms, support systems, and distractions that we normally surround ourselves with to keep chaos and fear at bay work at the same time to keep much of God’s grace at bay. What we use to buoy us up, wards off chaos as well as grace, both the demonic and the divine alike.

Conversely, when we are helpless we are open. That is why the desert is both the place of chaos and the place of God’s closeness. It is no accident that many saints and martyrs felt God’s presence so unmistakably just at that point in their lives when they had lost everything that could support them. They were in the desert. Scripture assures us it is there that God can send angels to minister to us.

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Resolutely Jesus turns toward death in fulfillment of his mission, and he asks his followers to go with him. This is the pivot from self-gratification to self-denial, from seeking acclaim to risking scorn, from the seduction of power to the prospect of suffering. In so turning we plunge into the paradox of the cross-and-empty-tomb gospel.

On Ash Wednesday, we Christians are traditionally reminded of our own mortality in a very vivid way, as the ashes are marked on our foreheads in the sign of the cross. In the sign of the cross we hear the words spoken over us: “Dust thou art and to dust thou wilt return.” This is a reminder not just of our physical mortality, but of the very path of Lent itself. We begin this season of Lent not only reminded of our death but marked for death, and that path of death is about our transformation.

## FASTING

What should we give up this year? Candy? Alcohol? Red meat? Facebook? Not necessarily. Instead let us focus on another kind of temptation: Indifference toward others. Indifference to our neighbor and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Usually, when we are healthy and comfortable, we forget about others (something God the Father never does): We are unconcerned with their problems, their sufferings and the injustices they endure. Our heart grows cold. As long as I am relatively healthy and comfortable, I don't think about those less well off. Today this selfish attitude of indifference has taken on global proportions, to the extent that we can speak of a globalization of indifference. It is a problem which we, as Christians, need to confront.

When we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. If you want to change your body, perhaps alcohol and candy are the way to go. But if you want to change your heart, a harder fast is needed.

Lent is a beneficial time of pruning – from falsity, from worldliness, from indifference: To not think that everything is OK if I am OK; to understand that what counts is not approval, the pursuit of success or consensus, but purity of heart and life. It's a time to rediscover one's Christian identity, "which is love that serves, not selfishness that uses." Fasting must never become superficial. Saint John Chrysostom said: "No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great."

### What Should I Do for Lent? 10 Tips for You

1. **Get rid of the lazy addiction to evil.** Lent is a "powerful" season, a turning point that can foster change and conversion in each of us. We all need to improve, to change for the better. Lent helps us and thus we leave behind old habits and the lazy addiction to the evil that deceives and ensnares us.
2. **Do something that hurts.** Lent is a fitting time for self-denial; we would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our own poverty. Let us not forget that real poverty hurts: No self-denial is real without this dimension of penance. I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt.
3. **Don't remain indifferent.** Indifference to our neighbor and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience. God is not indifferent to our world; he so loves it that he gave his Son for our salvation.
4. **Pray: Make our hearts like yours!** During this Lent, then, brothers and sisters, let us all ask the Lord: "*Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum*": **Make our hearts like yours.** In this way we will receive a heart which is firm and merciful, attentive and generous, a heart which is not closed, indifferent or prey to the globalization of indifference.
5. **Take part in the sacraments.** Lent is a favorable time for letting Christ serve us so that we in turn may become more like him. This happens whenever we hear the word of God and receive the sacraments, especially the confession and the Eucharist. There we become what we receive: The Body of Christ.
6. **Prayer.** In the face of so many wounds that hurt us and harden our hearts, we are called to dive into the sea of prayer, which is the sea of God's boundless love, to taste his tenderness. Lent is a time of prayer, of more intense prayer, more prolonged and more assiduous, abler to take on the needs of the brethren; intercessory prayer, to intercede before God for the many situations of poverty and suffering.
7. **Fasting.** We must be careful not to practice a formal fast, or one which in truth "satisfies" us because it makes us feel good about ourselves. Fasting makes sense if it questions our security, and if it also leads to some benefit for others, if it helps us to cultivate the style of the Good Samaritan, who bends down to his brother in need and takes care of him.
8. **Almsgiving.** Today gratuitousness is often not part of daily life where everything is bought and sold. Everything is calculated and measured. Almsgiving helps us to experience giving freely, which leads to freedom from the obsession of possessing, from the fear of losing what we have, from the sadness of one who does not wish to share his wealth with others.
9. **Help the Poor.** In the poor and outcast we see Christ's face; by loving and helping the poor, we love and serve Christ. Our efforts are also directed to ending violations of human dignity, discrimination and abuse in the world, for these are so often the cause of destitution. When power, luxury and money become idols, they take priority over the need for a just world. Our consciences thus need to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing.
10. **Evangelize.** The Lord asks us to be joyous heralds of this message of mercy and hope! It is thrilling to experience the joy of spreading this news, sharing the treasure entrusted to us, consoling broken hearts and offering hope to our brothers and sisters experiencing darkness.

You probably won't be able to take huge steps forward in all of these areas. Instead, pick a couple that stand out to you and try to find practical ways to grow in your love of God and your love of your neighbor.

## OUR PARISH NEWS

- February 26<sup>th</sup>. Continuing Adult Religious Education (C.A.R.E.)
- February 28<sup>th</sup>. Annual parish meeting
- April 17<sup>th</sup>. Bishop's Visitation.

# Saint Michael the Archangel



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