1 Lent B 2024

*May God strengthen us inwardly, that with the joy of the Holy Spirit, we may offer God something above the measure required of us. Amen.*

Of the many devils that beset us as we head off on another Lent, there is none so troublesome as the devil that keeps on repeating to us with smugness: “Why bother? Others aren’t really interested in improving themselves. Why should you be the only one who is?” Cynicism and self-pity are obstacles, devils with names, implying a low view of the efforts of others. There’s much evidence in the world to prove that we, like Jesus, are surrounded by wild beasts. It’s a jungle out there. We risk being bitten, stung, devoured, infected and picked apart. Nor do we notice, with Jesus, any angels waiting on us. So, maybe the devil has a point. Why offer the beasts an improved version of ourselves?

 Lent’s forty days are given us to confront this temptation. We have to get past this view of others as beasts. Today’s first reading even has God making a covenant with the beasts that accompany Noah on the ark: *“See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants, and with every living creature: all the birds and the various tame and wild animals.”* “Beast” is a nasty word when applied to people. What can we do to improve this image of others as obstacles to our own efforts at conversion?

 Our mental image consists of imagining beastly people surrounding us, as did the Wolf of Gubbio, an unsurmountable obstacle, demonizing and evil. It’s not to characterize others that way. It is to get inside our feelings toward others. We discover how unfair we have been to others. As sisters and brothers of penance, we have professed to live the Rule by conforming our thoughts and our deeds to those of Christ—that radical interior change—demonstrating how personal conversion gradually changes the landscape around us.

 Personal conversion invites us to look at our own sins. Our human nature is flawed. We can either be beastly or angelic. There is a lot of the hawk and the snake in us, a lot of the porcupine and the cold fish in us. No one has chomped on us, no one has bitten us. Especially not God. The beast in us turns out looking suspiciously like Bert Lahr as the Cowardly Lion.

 These Lenten days are meant to lead us into a different view of things. Individuals begin to come into a more benevolent focus as we give over our prejudice and disordered judgment. Then, we view others with compassion: we see all the different people on the face of the earth, so varied in dress and behavior. Some are white and others black. Some at peace and others at war. Some weeping and others laughing. Some well and others sick. Some being born and others dying. Personal conversion has induced a sharp sense of the struggles and mystery of others. They are no longer beasts.

 More than this, St Francis’ understanding of the humility of the incarnation invites us to consider how God dwells in His creatures: in the elements, in the plants, in the animals, in people. Francis realized that God loved our world and wanted to be with us. Creation was a powerful living mural of God’s love. The sun was not simply a large star. The sun was Francis’ own brother, Brother Sun. the moon was not simply a large asteroid. The moon for Francis was his own sister, Sister Moon. Each part of the created universe in the vision of Francis was a loving gift of God and a creature whose very existence praised God. God’s presence in and through creation, and God’s presence in the humanness of Jesus are incarnationally interrelated.

 I am reminded of the “Peaceable Kingdom” in the Book of Revelation: *“The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and young lion shall browse together…”* in an ideal garden of harmony and peace restored. God, humans and beasts dwelling peacefully together.

The story of Francis and the wolf helps bring about the same peace and reconciliation in this world. Peace, harmony, and reconciliation—all this starts when people begin to work at their own spiritual condition, a personal exercise of responsibility. We enter community of faith through baptism. As today’s second reading says, *“it is no removal of physical stain.”* Baptism introduces us to a long process of dealing with ourselves, with our own relationship with God in Jesus. Lent is a time for accelerating this process. May the beasts be kind to us all.

