

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Lent

When I was younger I didn't like to wake up in the morning and go to school. All throughout middle school and high school, my dad would just seem to call me several times every morning, saying, "rise and shine...up and at 'em." I can still hear those words reverberating in my head.

And some days, it's still seems just as difficult to get up early in the morning, especially for morning Masses. And I'm sure it's no different for some of you during the work-week either.

But what happens some of those mornings when you hear the alarm clock go off, and the sun is up and shining brightly in your room. You pull the blankets up. Maybe make that little groan, with the disbelief that it's morning already. And finally, when there's no other choice, you get out of bed, grumbling, "when did that sun get so bright?" (And many of you are laughing because you know what I'm talking about).

Why is it that the same sunlight we yearn for on a cloudy day, hurts our eyes so much in the early morning? When it shines through the window, we just prefer to pull the covers back up over our heads, and in the darkness, get back to sleep.

My friends, that theme of the struggle between light and darkness goes beyond our morning wake-up routines. In fact, the Scripture readings today use it to illustrate an important message we need to hear as we continue our journey through Lent.

Certainly, St. Paul speaks about this in our second reading today from Ephesians as he reminds us that we once were in darkness because of our sins. But now with Jesus, who is the Son of God, we live in the light of truth. And even more, in the Gospel from St. John, this theme of light and darkness is further developed. We hear about this man born blind from birth. Now, for the people of Jesus' day, when someone had a physical or mental disability, it was often attributed to being punishment for sin – either the person's own sins, or even the sins of his mother or father in a previous generation.

So, Jesus takes the example of this blind man, and sets out to teach His disciples and the spiteful, on-looking Pharisees a thing or two about sin. And what does He do? Jesus cures the blind man with this mud that He made. Can you can imagine this blind man's joy, now being able to see! But the Pharisees – they're upset, because Jesus did this on the Sabbath – the great day of rest, when no work what-so-ever was permitted.

Jesus, however, goes on to teach them all a lesson. In rash judgment, some of the people had scorned this man as being blind surely because of some sin he or his family committed. They believed he was in physical darkness because of his own spiritual darkness. But, it wasn't this man, whose sinful life was on trial; rather, it was the Pharisees'. They, as the righteous teachers of Israel, thought that they were beyond sin. After all, they talked all about religion, they rigorously sought to follow all of the commandments, and they kept the Sabbath. So, when Jesus, the Light of the World, comes shining the rays of His truth in their direction, they just pull the covers up over their heads, saying, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?"

My friends, we may not like to identify ourselves with the Pharisees. But sometimes we're more like them than we care to admit. How many times do we, like them, pull the covers up over our heads, and pretend there's not much to change in our lives? Or, how many times do we, like them, prefer the darkness of sin instead? And I don't mean the pitch-black darkness that's down-right scary, like murder – but rather those “comfortable” dark shadows that are easy on our eyes – those less agonizing sins. Things like the self-righteousness that says “At least I would never do that” – which keeps us from seeing what we in fact do do; or, the pride that enthrones us on the judgement seat criticizing others for everything from what they say and do to how they look to their race, religion, or political party; or how about the rationalization that says, “I can sneak a lustful glance at that person, or I can deliberately miss Mass on Sunday – and no one will ever know!” [pause]

This Lent, the Son shines His gentle rays of love and truth upon us, calling us to repentance – calling us to really work on turning away from particular areas of sin in our lives. He knows how much the full brightness of His truth can hurt our eyes, so He often calls us gradually, little by little. Look again at the example of the man born blind, and the unfolding of his own relationship with Jesus. When he was first asked who healed him, he said, “this guy named Jesus.” Questioned again, he declared Jesus “a prophet.” But by the end of the story, he confesses his belief in Jesus, and worships Him as the Messiah.

My brothers and sisters, the same is true for us. Turning toward Jesus and away from our sins often happens little by little, BUT it must happen. This Lent, Jesus calls us to come out from under our covers, and to experience the healing light of God's gentle mercy in ways like the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in our daily prayer, and through the little sacrifices and penances we make. And in these ways, we prepare ourselves for the brightness and joy of the glorious celebration of Easter Sunday. God bless you.