

3rd Sunday in Lent + 23 March 2025 + Ex 3:1-15 + I Cor 10:1-12 + Lk 13:1-9

Sometimes we hear the stories of the Old Testament and find them more than a little perplexing. And yet we cannot understand who our Savior Jesus Christ is without knowing His family history, both human and divine, as narrated in the Old Testament. I mention this because in our 2nd reading today, St. Paul offers us a very helpful way of understanding the Old Testament. And that is, all of the events of the whole sweeping narrative of the Old Testament, he says, *happened as an example for us*. Now that word ‘*example*’, in Greek, is ‘*tupos*’, from which we get the English word “*type*.” A ‘*type*’ is a shadowy image, or an incomplete pre-figuring, of a *reality* that is yet to come. And this notion of ‘*types*’ is critically important to understanding how the Old Testament fits with the New Testament.

So St. Paul is saying here in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians that the Old Testament story of the Exodus is actually a ‘*type*,’ or a ‘*preparation for*’ the grace of God now offered to all people in the Church through the Sacraments. The pillar of cloud that led the Israelites out from Egypt, and their passing through the waters of the Red Sea, is an image, or a ‘*type*,’ of Christian Baptism, in which a person passes through the waters that saves them from sin, and are overshadowed by the Holy Spirit like a *cloud*, so to speak. In a similar way, the *spiritual food* called Manna, and the *spiritual drink* of water from the Rock that nourished the Israelites in the desert, is a type of Body and Blood of Christ, that nourishes us in the Holy Eucharist. So the way that God took care of His People during the Exodus is an image of the way that He now heals and nourishes His Church through the Sacraments.

Now that being said, St. Paul goes on to note that these events weren’t just examples or “*types*” to prepare us, but also that *they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come*. Remember, the whole history of God’s interaction with man in the Old Testament is a nearly-continuous cycle that goes something like this: God blesses the people, they quickly grow ungrateful and fall into sin, their sin ends up enslaving them, so they finally cry out to God for mercy, God hears them, and once again offers them the blessings of salvation. We might be tempted to think here, well, “*all’s well that ends well, right?!*” But the People of Israel endured incredible misery on account of their sins. Yes, God forgave them, but their lives were much harder than they could have been, and that misery was not God’s desire for them. And the end of 2nd chances does come.

So how is this history of God’s People in the Old Testament a warning to us? Well, unfortunately our reading today cuts out a few verses that really help to explain Paul’s warning here. The specific sins from Israel’s history that he is warning against are four: idolatry, bodily immorality, putting God to the test, and grumbling. So first, idolatry. When we think of idolatry, we might think of statues or charms that ancient or primitive peoples would worship or rely on for magical help. That’s not really a problem today. But idolatry is still alive and well. In fact, it’s probably the most common sin: putting anything of this world before God. Ultimately, that’s the same as worshipping an idol.

The Israelites gave into idol worship in the desert when they fashioned the image of a calf out of gold to worship (cf. Ex 32). They did this when Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law, and was long delayed in coming back to them. Moses was their connection to God, and so they assumed God had forgotten them as well. This is very instructive for us too: it is in those moments when we feel lost, abandoned, forgotten by God, that we are the most vulnerable to fall into idol worship—to seeking something to grasp at to give us a feeling of control and safety. But idolatry never works, never helps. It only enslaves.

Next, bodily immorality. During the same episode of the golden calf, there is an inference in the text that the people not only worshipped the calf, but engaged in activity associated with the fertility cults that was practiced by their pagan neighbors. So it seems that while Israel had physically left Egypt, they did not leave the idolatry of Egypt—and all of its effects—behind. All of us are part of the post-modern American society. And for all of its goodness, there are just as many shadows. Specifically, the revolution in popular beliefs surrounding human nature as male and female, marriage and conjugal life constantly bear down on us, strongly pressuring us to give up our Christian vision of God’s plan for us. There is even pressure on the Church to give into a false vision that only enslaves. The Israelites pressured Moses’ brother Aaron into fashioning the calf, even though he should have known better. But evidently he feared the crowd, and he enabled their sin.

Third, “putting God to the test.” Now what does this really mean? Well, Israel put God to the test when they had no water to drink in the desert. So they said to Moses, *Is the Lord among us or not* (cf. Ex 17). They then tested God by “putting Him on trial,” so to speak, demanding Him to prove Himself. God did indeed prove Himself—He made water burst forth from out of a rock to satisfy their thirst. But this is the opposite of faith, the opposite of trust. God certainly did not lead the Israelites out of slavery just to let them thirst to death in the desert. But in their pain, they quickly forgot all He had done for them.

Fourth, grumbling. Just as they thirsted in the desert, the people also grew hungry. God fed them with heavenly bread—with Manna, it wasn’t good enough. They wanted meat, they said, just like they had back in Egypt (cf. Num 11). But here’s the thing: the people had plenty of meat; we know they had abundant livestock in their caravan. But they didn’t eat them, assumedly because they had taken on the Egyptian belief that revered these animals as gods. So not only were the people unsatisfied with what God gave them and were revering animals as idols, but they even said it would have been better to remain in slavery in Egypt! The warning here is that sin often blinds us to recognize all of the gifts that God constantly gives us, and why it is so important to give thanks each day for God’s goodness.

So finally, St. Paul concludes with a warning: *Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall*. It’s easy to think things like, “well, I’m a pretty good person, I haven’t killed anyone.” But Jesus reminds us in our Gospel today of our continual need to repent, and so to bear good fruit, while there is still time.