

- It would be easy, I think, to forget that today is the first Sunday of Lent or to dismiss today's readings in light of all that has happened. But this season and our readings today, especially our Gospel, give us insight, both comfort and hope, in a difficult time. Like Jesus, we are called to make our way through this desert.

- Jesus goes to the desert, as directed by the Spirit, to be alone with God, and, because He is fully human, He is also tempted by Satan
 - Jesus shares our weakness. God has made Himself weak and so is forced to contend with temptation.
 - Turn these stone into bread
 - Throw yourself down
 - Worship me
 - With a growing intrusiveness, and an incisive building intensity, Satan attacks Jesus:
 - First there's an attack on physical hunger and bodily comforts, an attack which also points to the deeper question of world hunger and the scandal of poverty.
 - Then there's the attack on the person of Jesus, both literally and figuratively. Will God allow me to fail? Or to fall? Will God lead me into danger?
 - Lastly, there's the attack on the mission of Jesus. Look at all these kingdoms. Look at all I can give you, without any suffering, without the Cross. Just cut a few corners, bow down, worship me.
 - Ultimately these temptations are so sinister and so difficult because they challenge Jesus to question His identity – **If** you are the Son of God?!
 - The insidiousness of the temptation by Satan is to question who Jesus is and how will He fulfill the mission entrusted to Him by the Father.

- Can you do it, Jesus? Can you save the world? After all, if should not the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God feed the poor, eradicate suffering, and bring all people to worship? If not, then just what is God doing?

- As you can imagine, I have asked myself that very question over the last few days. “God, just what **are** You doing?” Let me give you the context.
 - Last Wednesday, a week before Ash Wednesday, we received the report from the engineering firm we had hired to examine and assess the buildings of St. Francis and St. Mary.
 - We had contracted with them as part of our own evaluation of where we stand as a community.
 - As you know, since my arrival, first as administrator and then as pastor, it has been our goal to review where we are as a community and then to set priorities accordingly. We needed an accurate picture of the true financial cost of necessary repairs to help determine what our priorities would be. As I have said repeatedly, those priorities are not limited to our buildings but have to take into account what we have and what we need.
 - When that report came in last week, I was shocked to say the least. Let me share with you some of the basics.
 - The church building was originally constructed as a wood-framed structure set over a crawlspace foundation of rubble stone masonry foundation walls.
 - Since the original construction of the building, the front and side walls were bricked and the crawlspace was excavated to become a basement, most likely for storage and utilities.

- That excavation gravely undermined the integrity of the original foundation. At some point, a beam was placed in the basement to support the floor above and appears now “to be supported precariously on a single stone.”
- Further, the mortar of the foundation and of the brick veneer has greatly deteriorated allowing moisture to enter. Sustained and repeated cycles of freezing and thawing have done even more significant damage. Erosion of soil around the foundation added to the problem.
- The stone foundation walls have settled such that the wood framing above is no longer touching or bearing on the foundation wall. Daylight is visible in the basement through the gap created by the settlement of the walls.
- In summary, due to mortar deterioration, excavation, and erosion, the foundation of the Saint Francis church building requires significant structural repair to reestablish the structural integrity of the walls. The report recommended we cease using the building because risk of sudden collapse was considered uncomfortably high.
- Because the structural engineer indicated that collapse was not immediately imminent, I ordered a second, independent assessment.
 - That report came this past Thursday and was even more emphatic that the building be closed immediately and that we cease further use.
 - This second report was even more urgent than the first citing that walls could collapse when the area around the building is saturated from heavy rain storms. You may recall that we have had several sudden and heavy rains over the last few years, something of which I was especially reminded whenever the Holy Family rectory basement flooded.

- In light of the urgency of this second report, and in consultation with the Archdiocese, I was left with no choice but to close the building immediately. I am grateful for their help and their support throughout this situation.
 - I am especially grateful for Ms. Christin Kinman and Mr. Nolan McCoy, both of whom came out personally to inspect the situation and confirm what needed to be done. Both of whom (are) were also here (today) yesterday to offer prayerful support and answer any questions (you may have).
 - I also grateful to Mr. Terry Kirby my Director of Mission Support who spearheaded our efforts both in starting the projects and in responding to the reports and to Faye Williams who worked closely with him.

- Some will ask immediately whether the building can be repaired.
 - And the simple answer is yes. However, the cost would be several hundred thousand dollars just to make the building safe again.
 - That, also put simply, is beyond our means. Even to get an accurate estimate of the total cost would involve paying tens of thousands of dollars to a structural engineering firm to provide a full investigation and develop a comprehensive structural plan.
 - That would not address any other of the challenges that come in the building, such as the bowing windows or the water damage that has led to the peeling ceiling. Nor does it meet any of the additional needs we have as a community, including and especially use of space.
 - We do not have the resources necessary.

- It is a devastating loss and we grieve our spiritual home. You have celebrated the joys of baptisms and marriages, of encountering Jesus and making disciples who love and serve Him. Within those walls, we have said farewell to those who have died, and supported one another through challenging times. Many families have been members of the parish for generations and the building has been a part of our community for over a century.

- So, where do we go from here?

- For the foundation of an answer, I return to today's gospel. Jesus responds to each temptation by quoting scripture.
 - This is not merely Jesus showing how good His memory is and spouting scripture as answers to a Final Jeopardy question. In responding as He does, Jesus demonstrates that in all temptation, indeed, in all He does, He puts God first.
 - Jesus trusts in God alone, refuses to push God aside, refuses to take the easy or comfortable road. He refuses to force His will, refuses to use only for His own what God has provided in and for the mission of salvation.
 - Jesus remains rooted in God, even though He is uncomfortable and unsure and afraid. Jesus keeps His identity as the Son of God even though the path is not clear and the answer is not simple.

- And in this, Jesus not only tells us how to overcome our temptations but also provides our response to the question of where we go from here.

- Like Jesus, we can answer this temptation to despair with scripture (1 Peter 2:3-5): *W[we] have tasted that the Lord is good. [We] come to Jesus Christ, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God...like living stones, [we] let...[ourselves] be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*
 - It is not mere semantics and never more pertinent to say that the Church is not a building of bricks and mortar. The Church is not a building but the Body of Christ.
 - The Church, you and I, is a community of believers accompanying one another on the road to salvation, reaching out to help one another, and others as well, to know the love God has for us.

- I cannot tell you because I do not know all that lies before us. I can't tell you what the disposition of the St. Francis church building will be. I can't tell what the plan is for Saint Mary church building both for now and in the long term.
- I don't yet know how we will make the best use of the space we have or how we will meet our needs as the presence of Christ in a community that is growing, not merely in numbers with the new houses that are going up all over here but among people in need, as generations face uncertain futures with the strong and essential foundation of a relationship with Jesus.
- Like Jesus, we must remember and remain rooted in God's love for us, even when the struggle is difficult or challenging or uncomfortable. Like Jesus we must keep focused on our primary identity: **We are the Body of Christ.**

- I cannot offer you specifics but I tell you that we do go forward.
 - Yes, we mourn the loss of our spiritual home and that will take time. In the late Spring or early summer, we'll have some type of formal ceremony to mark the milestones we have had in that church building.
 - But we press on, in the words of the motto of Cardinal Keeler who (celebrates) celebrated his 86th birthday (today) yesterday and who I served for 10 years as priest secretary: *Opus fac Evangelistae* Do the work of an evangelist.
 - This is the call that we have from Christ Himself in the Great Commission we just spent the past five weeks breaking open.
 - This is the foundation for our efforts of discipleship and our ongoing learning as we seek to live out what Pope Francis calls the Joy of the Gospel.
 - This the call we have received from Archbishop Lori to become, along with Holy Family, a unified pastorate, working together as missionary disciples to reach out to the people in this valley and share with them our faith.
 - This is the reason for the recent efforts of our Pastoral Council to evangelize and get more deeply involved with the new households in Brunswick Crossing and other areas.
 - And is what lies at the heart of our efforts with Alpha that begin in Brunswick on Wednesday evening. In Alpha, through Alpha, we are building our own relationship with Jesus Christ that we might share the adventure our faith can be, even when the path is unclear and the way difficult.
 - Immediately before the passage about living stones that I used a moment ago is this: *Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, insincerity, envy, and all slander; like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk so that through it you may grow into salvation.* We can and we must work together to help our community move forward and help one another to grow into salvation. We must avoid the temptation to think only of our loss.

- And we do none of this alone. At the end of the Gospel, Matthew points out that angels came and ministered to Jesus.
 - They may be dressed differently, but we also have our angels as we spend time in the desert.
 - I'm grateful for the support of our Archbishop who called me (this) yesterday afternoon to share directly with me his prayerful support and asked me to pass the same for all of you.
 - I am grateful to (Bishop Parker and to) Monsignor Hannon who (are) is here with us today. (They) He (are) is here to show the pastoral concern of our Archbishop and of our Archdiocesan family. I'm grateful for their support for me also, looking to help me even as they challenged me to lead.
 - I mentioned already but it bears repeating my gratitude to Christin Kinman our regional representative and Nolan McCoy, the Director of the Archdiocesan Facilities office.
 - I'm grateful to Terry Kirby, Faye Williams and our staff from here and from Holy Family all of whom dropped everything they were doing to make sure we could address the issue in a timely manner.
 - I'm grateful for our facilities committee here at St. Francis-St. Mary that has delayed this day as long as possible and for their continued work.
 - I'm grateful for the words of support and encouragement from Father Limmer who asked me to convey to you and to all of us his prayerful support. I spoke with him yesterday before we sent the email and then he called me again this morning just to see how I was doing. He wanted to be with us this afternoon but graciously agreed to fill in for me at HFCC.
 - I'm grateful for the words of support and consolation that we have had from other Brunswick area pastors who have promised us prayers and any help they can provide. I look forward to working with them, not only in this time of crisis but in moving forward as sister communities.

- I'm grateful for the words of support and consolation that we have received from my brother priests, the pastors of the area Catholic parishes who have also promised us any support that we need.
- Most of all, I am grateful to all of you, so many of who have responded with encouraging words of support and prayers, even as you grieve the loss of our spiritual home.

- In the Gospel today, Jesus shows Himself to be vulnerable, to be open to possible failure, to confusion and seeming abandonment. In this Jesus shows us who God is and how God comes.
 - A little over two months ago, we celebrated Christmas – the Omniscient, omnipotent, God placed all His power and glory aside to empty Himself, becoming a helpless baby: naked and vulnerable, placed in the wood of the simple manger.
 - In about 40 days, we will remember that the life of Jesus is a journey from the wood of that simple manger to the wood of the cross – where Jesus will show the same vulnerability, the same helplessness, even the same nakedness, now offered precisely for and to us.

- This is the God who created us as our first reading reminds us and saved us in his Son as our second reading reminded us. This is the God who will guide us, who will lead us not only during this Lent but on our far longer journey as a community of believers. Thanks be to God.