

The Scandal & My Spiritual Process

A few years ago now, my primary care doctor wrote and order for me to undergo a medical procedure which, for the sake of decorum, I will describe in a euphemistic way as an *exploration of the very depths of my being*. I showed up to this clinic, and, lo-and-behold, the nurse was the mother of one of my fellow priests. So, right off the bat, I lost my anonymity. And, to add to my immense discomfort, she immediately instructed me to take off every stitch of clothing except for my socks, and to put on a large, flimsy, paper napkin to cover my shame.

Anyway. . . I got rolled into the procedure room where I met the doctor and a small team of assistants, and I felt duty-bound to warn the doctor that, after all that I had done to prepare for the moment, my insides still felt like they want to be on the outside. So I wanted to apologize to him in advance if there should be any mishaps. And then, as if going through a time warp of some sort, I woke up and it was all over. And the nurse—my fellow priest’s mother—yelled across the clinic, “*How did you do Father Greg?*” And in my half drugged-up-state, I quipped, “*I think they found my soul!*”

Why am I telling you this? Why did I even go there? First of all, I am trying to make humor out of an undignified moment in my life. **But, more importantly, I am also trying to make the point that if you do not look, you will not see, and if you do not seek, you will not find, and if you do not listen, you will not hear.** I have close friends who will not undergo the sort of thing I am describing because of the indignity of it or for fear of what it may yield.

In the context of this hideous moment in the life of the Church through which we are living, my personal process of coming to terms with the horror and the profoundly evil abuse of children by men who pretended to be servants of God in his Church has led me to the prophets of the Exile in the Old Testament. Therefore, I feel really blessed that Sunday’s first reading came from Isaiah, who is part of that tradition, along with Jeremiah, Ezekiel and some others.

Generally speaking, the prophets of the Exile account for the massive tragedy which was the destruction of Jerusalem and Israel by the Babylonian Empire in two ways: First of all, the Exile was a punishment for the profound corruption and sin of the Kings, the Priests and the People . . . punishment for their injustice, their loss of piety, their greed and their lusts: And this is to be a long, bitter and painful punishment which will last the lifetime of some of the people. Secondly and more importantly, the purpose of allowing the Exile to so profoundly disrupt the lives of the Chosen People was to enable eyes to be opened so that they can see clearly, and ears to be cleared so that they can hear: **You need to see the sin and evil in order to do something about it!** And this is precisely the message of our passage from Isaiah for today’s Mass: Following a brutal condemnation and description of the punishment incurred for their perversion and corruption, Isaiah describes the Exile as a therapy for restoration: “*Say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong! Do not be afraid! Here is your God, he comes with vindication. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf be cleared!*” (pause) In other words, for the Chosen People to wake up from their delusions and from the grip of sin, it was necessary for God to allow the status quo to be destroyed, (including the most sacred Temple in Jerusalem). Everything is burnt to the ground, and the people are forced into the desert . . .not just to be punished, but so that they could see and hear and understand the depths of the evil which had insinuated itself in their midst.

I humbly submit to you that this is what the Church is undergoing right now. Many people will leave in disgust. Priests will lose heart. Extremists, reactionaries and opportunists of every stripe will assert themselves. There may only be left a “Remnant of the People” from which to rebuild “the Body of Christ.” And, lest other Christian Communities and the rest of the secular world think that they are outside of this problem, they would do well to listen and learn: Priests are just an easy-to-identify, “canary in the coal mine.” This evil is pervasive in the world of fallen, human nature.

But, by this reflection, I am introducing you to my own spiritual process: I didn't sign-up for this garbage, and neither did you. Nevertheless, I must accept whatever befalls the Body of Christ. If that means the rest of my priestly-life will be spent ministering to a "Remnant," then I will do the best I can with the Grace of God to begin the rebuilding of the Temple and the City walls. Acceptance of the situation in a disposition of faith was the counsel of the prophets, especially the Prophet Jeremiah.



And so, after a solid month of reflection, inspired by Isaiah and the others my assertion is that this is a moment of extreme Grace through which we are passing together: Structures are being torn down and burned to the ground: The mighty are being brought down from their thrones. We are being forced to look so that we can really see. We are being compelled to listen, so that we can really hear. Israel could not do so until she was dragged out into the open desert, naked and exposed, (as I felt in the medical clinic in that paper gown).

Evil, it turns out, is not a superficial wound on our nature: It runs deep and wide and, as St. Peter warns, ***“the Devil is prowling like a Lion, looking for someone to devour.”*** Without a Savior, we have no chance against it. Therefore, our faith and our commitment to Jesus cannot be superficial. Whoever decides to be part of the Remnant of the People, will have to be fully committed, and I, for one, will probably not live to see the Temple and the Walls of the City fully rebuilt; but that's OK. It turns out that this is, apparently, my calling and my purpose. I hope and pray that a portion of the spirits of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Apostles of the Lord will be given to me, my Bishop and my brother priests . . . to accept the cleansing of the Church, to wield the two edge sword of the Holy Gospel, and to humble ourselves in the presence of Jesus in the Holy Sacrament of His Body and Blood.

In a certain sense, our Faith in the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church, should not really be touched by this scandal: That does not mean we aren't all horrified and disgusted with clergy abusers and profoundly sorry for childhood victims: But this is a matter of sinners in the Church. . . wolves in sheep's clothing. Our Faith is in Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen from the Dead. And it remains a faith in His presence at the heart of the Church through the Holy Spirit, in the Eucharist, and in Word and Sacrament. In the midst of this raging storm, this is *“the rock to whom I'm clinging.”* He is at the center of His Church, and it is He who lent that very name to his Chief Apostle, to whom it was said, *“You are rock and on this rock I will build my Church.”*