

The purple colors, the ashes, the lack of flowers, the old rugged cross, all remind us that this week we begin Lent. “Here we go, again,” we might think. “No, not already,” we might protest. Maybe we’ll look into our religious storeroom and cart out some of practices we’ve stored since last Spring. Let’s see, “Oh yeah, I gave up alligator nuggets. That worked. Hmm, I made extra time for some spiritual reading, that was good. I made a contribution to Catholic Relief Services. That worked.” So out of the closet comes well-worn items to fit the season.

I guess that is all good, even if it is boring. Maybe, though, we can find a way to make this Lent special. The Gospel for today is very simple. Instead of elaborating on the temptations of the Lord, Mark just briefly says that Jesus went into the desert for forty days, fought off temptation, was administered to by angels and then returned and went to battle. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God. It’s simple. It’s focused.

To avoid complicating our lives this Lent, may I suggest that we picture a simple image and let that image motivate our lives. The image is Jesus crying. The image comes from a story about a father, Walter, and his little fireball of a son, Matthew. Matthew would just go into action without thinking about what he was doing or the consequences of his actions. If he set his mind to something, it was done even if he might have to pay dearly for it later.

Now, it seems that when Matthew was about ten, he lived for comic books. He begged his parents for a comic book every time they were in a store, and would read it over and over again.

Sometimes, his parents said that they didn't think he needed any more comics. That's when he began to steal them. One day his father, Walter, went into Matthew's room and found him with a big stack of comic books. "Where did you get these?" his father asked, knowing that Matthew couldn't have the money for them. "I borrowed them from the library at school," Matthew said. "You mean, you stole them," his father replied. A call went to the school with great apologies from Walter, and then Matthew was marched down there to return the books, apologize and do whatever chores librarian had in mind.

The next summer while on vacation in a little village in Vermont, Walter saw his son with another stack of comic books. "Where did you get these?" he asked. "From the corner store when the owner wasn't looking," Matthew answered. At least the kid was honest. Money for the comics was given to the store owner and the rest of Matthew's summer was spent working for his father and mother, instead of fishing and playing with the other children. Walter also took the comics and burned them in front of Matthew one by one. As each one burned he had Matthew repeat after him, "Thou shall not steal." He told him, "Matthew, if you ever do this again, I am going to have no choice but to spank you."

It didn't deter the imp. A few months later, Matthew stole more comic books. This time, his father told him he had a spanking coming. So he went into Matthew's room, put him over his knee and gave him five swats on the behind. When he finished, he could see that the boy wanted to cry, but was doing his best to hold it in. He didn't want to cry in front of his dad.

So his father said, "Matthew, I'm going to leave you alone for a little while, but then I'll come back in a few minutes." As soon as he closed the door behind him, Walter was overcome with fear and sorrow for his son. What will this boy become? How had he gone wrong as a father? And then Walter himself began to cry. He cried very hard. After a while, he washed his face and went back to talk to his son.

Many, many years later, Walter passed away. Matthew, a grown man, was driving his Mom home from the funeral parlor and reminiscing about his Dad. Matthew brought up his stealing comic books. "You know, Mom, after Dad spanked me, I never stole anything again." "I guess you were afraid he'd give you a worse spanking," his mother said. "Oh no, Mom. I never stole again because when Dad stepped out of my room, I could hear him crying." The tears shed in love and pain changed Matthew's life. And as we start lent we remember that Jesus cried for us.

We find several instances of Jesus crying in the Gospels. Jesus looked at the city of Jerusalem that rejected him and wept. He wept over his friend Lazarus, over death and the pain that death brought to Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, their neighbors and the entire village of Bethany.

When the night before he died, Judas betrayed him, you could sense the pain in the Lord's voice and the tear in his eye when he said, "Judas, do you betray me with a kiss, a kiss of friendship." Before this Jesus wept in that Garden. He could feel the gravity of our sins and the personal price he would have to pay for them.

The image of the weeping Jesus could be our guide for this Lent. How must the Lord feel, knowing that his people can find no solutions to world events other than the organized killing called war? Jesus weeps. How must he feel knowing that the money spent on eye makeup or video games in one year in the United States could end the African famine? Jesus cries. How must the Lord feel knowing that we have used the advancement of technology to devise new ways of killing from the womb to the battlefield? Jesus weeps. How must the Lord feel knowing that we have used devotion to Him as an excuse to attack people He also loves, like the gay trying to live a chaste life or the woman suffering from post abortion trauma. Jesus weeps. How must the Lord feel knowing that so often we have all just given up, pushed our Christian responsibilities to the side, attempted to separate morality from our faith and claimed that any twinge of conscience is merely Catholic guilt not an inner call to conversion. Jesus weeps.

What we do during Lent, what we surrender, is not for its own sake, nor is it simply for our own self-improvement. What we do, the good deeds, the prayers, the sacrifices, all have as their goal of strengthening a deep and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Our goal is to know him with a burning desire and to love him with a burning passion.

The image of Jesus weeping reminds us that He is someone who cares about each one of us. He suffers when we hurt ourselves by giving in to sin. He allows His love for us to reduce him to tears whenever we betray that love.

And God placed the rainbow in the sky, says the first reading. It was a sign. It was a covenant. It was a sign that God would never give up on His people. It was a covenant, that if his sons and daughters would turn from sin and choose Him, their lives would be full of beauty, love and goodness.

He will not give up on us. He cries when He sees us jump into immorality. He cries when we give up on ourselves. Like the father in the story. He cries out of love. Perhaps if we contemplate the weeping Jesus this Lent, we will be more inclined turn from all that is destroying us; turn from all that gives him pain. Perhaps we will really change our lives. Perhaps we will give up those elements of our lifestyle that are slowly killing us. If we contemplate the weeping Jesus, we can change this Lent.

And this won't be because we fear a spanking.
It will be because we can hear Jesus crying.