

THE BATTLE

Life is a journey. And we are on the journey. It can be a great journey, but it is not always all fun and games. The journey can take us into the wilderness where dangers abound. The Bible readings for today tell of the people of Israel who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and Jesus who was driven into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. We learn from these stories that the wilderness is a war zone - a war for your heart!

The devil is a master at manipulating the heart. He can use all kinds of things to steal your heart away from God - even good things. We heard in the story about Jesus how he used food and the mission of God, and even the Bible to tempt Jesus. And so it is with us. You say, you are not aware of this war? That could be, most people have no idea it is happening. But the very fact that so many people are unaware of this war makes it all the more dangerous.

Will you give your heart to God? Or will you let your heart be stolen away? Advertisers are constantly trying to pull on your heartstrings. So is your boss. And your kids. And your friends. The stress on your heart can be so great that you can lose heart. It isn't just the attractions, the addictions and the affairs, although, there is enough of these to cause even the best of us to lose heart. But there is the busyness, the drivenness, the desire to do good.

It is a battle I fight every day. There are so many good things to do. Important things. Urgent things. But do I give my heart to God in prayer? Do I quiet myself to listen to God? When I don't, there is a cooling off of my love for God. That's the way it works. The devil often uses good things to steal our hearts from God. The battle is so subtle. Yet so devastating!

You would think we humans would learn, but time and time again our hearts wander off, our enthusiasm for the Lord weakens, and we lose heart.

Back in the beginning of time, human beings were created in the image of God. We were awesome, the crown of God's creation. All that we ever wished we could be, we were - and more. We were fully alive because our hearts were connected to God.

But lurking in the Garden was the Enemy, who lied to our ancestors about where true life can be found and stole their hearts away. And ever since then, we humans have believed the lie. Instead of giving our hearts to God, we let our hearts be stolen away. And great has been our fall!

But God has not abandoned us! God fights for us. Have you ever wondered why so much of the Bible is about war? That is because God is a Warrior who is fighting for our hearts.

"I did not come to bring peace, but a sword," said Jesus. (Matthew 10:34) Jesus is a Warrior fighting for our hearts. The life of Christ is marked by battle. He kicked out demons with a stern command. He rebuked a fever and it left Peter's mother-in-law. He confronted the Pharisees time and time again. With a loud cry he woke Lazarus from the dead. He battled the Enemy on the cross. Today's Gospel reading is about Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness. It is part of the battle, this same war, a war for your heart.

Don't think for a minute that this war doesn't involve you. "*Wake up,*" says the book of Ephesians. "*Be careful how you live . . . because the days are evil.*" (Ephesians 5:14-16) And First Peter says, "*Be sober,*

be watchful, your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him. Stand firm in your faith." (1 Peter 5:8-9) Christianity is not just about committee meetings, potluck suppers, and being as nice as possible, as good as all this might be. We are at war! We are part of a violent clash of kingdoms! Your heart is the battle ground.

Will you give your heart to God? Will you love the Lord your God with all your heart? Will you trust God wholeheartedly? Every day you face temptations to sell your heart. You are tempted, like Jesus was. Jesus, though, stood firm in the face of temptation. His heart did not waver. Thank God he did not waver! There is hope in Jesus. Jesus fights passionately for you. He doesn't back down. "Father, forgive them," he prayed from the cross. And God does. For the sake of Jesus, God forgives you, wipes the slate clean, and gives you new life.

The Christian life is a love affair of the heart. It cannot be lived primarily as a set of principles. It cannot be managed with programs. It cannot be lived exclusively as a moral code. It is all about Jesus setting you free to love God and to love others with your whole heart.

Perhaps you long for this love affair. Perhaps you do not love God as passionately as you once did. Perhaps you have let your heart drift away. Perhaps you are going through life "half-heartedly." It is possible to recover the lost life of your heart. It is possible to find again the intimacy, the beauty, the adventure of life with God.

So if you find yourself in the wilderness and the battle is raging for your heart, turn to Jesus. Go with him to the cross and the empty tomb. Nothing has the power to stir your heart more than the Passion of Jesus. Give your heart to God, for there you will find unlimited love!