

**Lent III – Cycle B
St. Joseph’s – Cockeysville, MD
March 19, 2006**

If you’re a Paparazzi then March madness means following Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie to Italy to take pictures at their much anticipated wedding this weekend.

If you’re a Villanova Wildcat, a U-Conn Huskie, a Duke Blue Devil, a Georgetown Hoya then March madness means getting to the final 16 in the NCAA basketball tournaments. And from there to the elite eight and then the final four.

If you’re not any of the above, then like myself March madness means anger at the steep rise in gasoline prices. I care more about that than I do about Brad & Angelina or watching a bouncing ball to see who receives a national trophy.

Since we are in a church and not a basketball arena, I would like to explore some spiritual meanings behind a rite of spring we call March madness.

It begins with Ash Wednesday when Catholics get high on repairing our relationships with others by the way we renew and deepen our relationship with God. Christian communities, like basketball frenzied college campuses, have their own ways of celebrating March madness.

For six weeks we engage the inner life in ways we do not engage it the rest of the year. We pray more contritely to silence the voices that lie to us about attitudes and values that harm others, leaving us to deal with the fallout of shame and guilt. We seek forgiveness through the sacrament of reconciliation to acknowledge the presence of a healing inner voice that coaches us how to balance our inner life with our outer life. We give witness to the unchurched or unconverted with a new boldness. We fast in order to discern our tangible hungers from intangible hungers. We give alms to get better at practicing with the others the charity God practices with us. We pray the rosary more regularly, walk the way of the cross weekly and try to slow down daily.

This kind of March madness is not intended to draw attention to us. Rather, it is meant for us to get better at paying attention to God and then take that to a deeper level by noticing God noticing us.

That is the meaning of the Exodus reading. Israel was a nation no different from a small club or a large corporation. Its laws bound them together. The Ten Commandments stand at the head of the body of laws that would regulate its existence. They are a preamble to all the laws that would

follow, and are more like the Preamble to our own Constitution. “We the People...” opens the document to which we trace our own existence as the U.S.A. “I, the Lord am your God...” Opens the document to which Israel, and the whole history of salvation, including the Church, can trace its existence.

The Ten Commandments are a way of saying, “We, the People of God,” are established as a nation belonging to God, and secured by respect for others who are his special possession. This covenant, written in stone, is what Israel carried with them to the Promised Land. It was the monument that drew them back into focus as the chosen people of God whenever they lost that focus.

In the gospel reading the stone tablets have been replaced with the presence of the Son of God in Jesus. For John the evangelist, Jesus will be the *sign* of God’s presence in the world. He reveals the God who lies beneath the sign. Jesus himself is the very “place” where God is found, the New Temple.

Some do not see who Jesus really is. This triggers his anger, his mad act of cleaning out the temple of merchants and money-changers. The Jewish Passover was not the event to desecrate the temple. Crowds engaging in selling de-focused them from having hearts rightly disposed on the purpose of the temple, namely to pray, offer worship and renew their relationship to God. Jesus used this occasion to teach a new lesson, namely, he is the Temple that will be “raised up” from the dead. He is the new place where we can meet and be with God. Like the crowd in the story some of us believe in him, some of us only have partial faith in him and some of us still need signs.

That is what a retreat is for. That is why I have returned. For the next four days I will lead you and walk with you through a spiritual experience called a retreat. We’re going to use your patron saint, Joseph, to access God. Joseph the caregiver, Joseph the dreamer, and Joseph the promise keeper are the themes we’re going to celebrate as a way of renewing our relationship with God. This is a necessary step in repairing our relationships with others.

The retreat services in the morning will follow the 8:30 AM daily Mass Monday – Wednesday. The services in the evening will be at 7:30 PM. Monday evening will be a festival Mass in honor of the feast day of St. Joseph. There will be silence, singing, scripture reading, preaching, faith sharing.

There is an old Sufi saying: “*We do not see things as they are, we see things as we are.*” This Lent, let these words take root in you so that you

might see yourself as a sojourner instead of as a rival, as surrendering instead of always wanting to win, as desiring stillness instead of busyness, as being vulnerable with God instead of resisting God, as experiencing God in care giving, dreaming and promise keeping instead of confining God to church or chapels.

March madness in the world of college basketball will be history again in a few weeks. But in the spiritual world it will continue for as long as we convert our heart and shape our life according to the life of Jesus Christ. With him there is no need to follow a bouncing ball. There is only letting go, dying and rising, so we are free to get caught up in the mystery, not the frenzy, of seeing how God is madly in love with us.