

February 28, 2016 11:00 a.m.

Hackett Catholic Prep

Third Sunday of Lent-----Closing Mass for “The Presence”

“The Presence” is a youth retreat focused on the Eucharist. Approximately 300 high school students from around the Diocese (including two parish groups from Grand Rapids Diocese) were in attendance. This is Bishop Bradley’s Homily for the Closing Mass.

In response to Jesus’ Words in the Gospel, we heard the priest say “The Gospel of the Lord,” and we all said “Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!” The reason why we give praise to our Lord Jesus Christ when we hear any part of the Gospel proclaimed is because Jesus is sharing directly with us the Good News of His Love. And for that same reason, we say “Thanks be to God” every time we hear any other part of God’s Word proclaimed----because every verse of Sacred Scripture is God’s way of telling us how much He wants to be present to us!

That’s what you’ve been reflecting on, and I hope you’ve been moved to the depths of your souls, throughout this weekend called “The Presence”. You’ve been hearing God’s Word proclaimed; and you’ve encountered our Lord Jesus Himself in His sacred and abiding Presence in the Eucharist.

And that’s why I say, once more, how very pleased I am to be here as you conclude this amazing and grace-filled weekend. You’ve spent the last three days together, Friday evening, all day Saturday, and half of today-----More precisely, you’ve been together approximately 40 hours. You’ve come together here from 15 parishes around our Diocese, along with two groups from parishes in the Grand Rapids Diocese, young people from the JMJ Home Schooling community and some students from here at Hackett Catholic Prep.

I’m guessing that you came here as individuals; perhaps many of you didn’t even know one another on Friday evening. But now, after 40 hours and the better part of three days, as we get ready to conclude this time together in “The Presence” of our Lord, I assume you’re leaving here somewhat different than when you came: no longer just nearly 300 individuals, but young people, and adult leaders, who have become bonded together in Faith through the Love of the One Who is always Present to us: Our Lord Jesus!

Today’s Readings for the Third Sunday of Lent couldn’t be any more appropriate for the conclusion of this “The Presence” weekend!

We heard in our First Reading from the Book of Exodus about Moses who was tending the flock of his father-in-law in the middle of the desert, when he saw an amazing sight: a bush, completely on fire, but not at all being consumed by the fire. So, he decided that he needed to draw closer to see how such a thing could be. But then the Lord spoke from the Burning Bush, calling out Moses' name, and Moses responded: "*Here I am!*", meaning he was ready to listen to Whoever this Voice was. The Lord then said: "*Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground.*"

That's when the Lord went on to introduce Himself: "*I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.*"

Remember that Moses didn't know God yet. He had been born a Hebrew, but he was raised in the Egyptian society with their pagan culture. So, Moses needed to get to know God, and God very much wanted to get to know him.

How appropriate for this weekend as well---that's what you have been doing: getting to know God and allowing God to get to know you. You have spent a good part of these 40 hours or so in the Divine Presence---in Jesus' Presence in the Holy Eucharist. I assume that all of you "knew" about God in your life already---that you know Who God is to some degree. But I'm pretty certain that as a result of this weekend, you know God a lot better than you did---that you know God at a very personal level---in a "heart to heart" way. You've come to understand what Moses came to know---what it means to know God first-hand. And therefore, you can understand what Moses came to understand---what being close to God means, and how that closeness---that "Presence" of God--- makes everything "holy ground"!

I also know that over these three days, most of you have experienced God's Mercy in the Sacrament of Penance. You took the time to get in touch with your sins, and, because you are convinced of God's Love for you, you were able to bring your sins to God, knowing that God's love will forgive you any time, and every time, you turn to Him and ask. That's what we prayed in today's Psalm Response: *The Lord is kind and merciful!*

Today's Gospel Reading is particularly appropriate as Jesus was being asked by His contemporaries about a couple of tragedies that had taken place in Jesus' time: 1) some Galileans who had been killed while offering sacrifices at the Temple; and 2) 18 innocent people who were killed when a Tower fell on them. Maybe that's been a part of your prayers to Jesus during these days, asking the same question as Jesus was asked in the Gospel: "Why, Jesus,

do terrible---tragic----bad things happen to good people?" That's a question that human beings have asked throughout all of history.

Many of us have been asking that question a lot this past week ever since last Saturday night's tragic, senseless, random shootings that took the lives of six innocent people----one of them a young person your age----and left two innocent people fighting for their lives, again, one of them a young person your age.

In the face of such senseless tragedy, we struggle with the question "why?" For some reason, people oftentimes ask if this, or any, tragedy is a "punishment from God for something bad that person did?"

But Jesus is very clear in His answer about those tragedies that took place in His time, or tragic acts of violence that take place any time, including those here in Kalamazoo-----it is **not** a punishment from God; to be more precise, it is **not** from God at all. Those kinds of acts of violence, or even unexplainable accidents, are the result of the human condition, living in an imperfect and finite world, and our own human frailty. God doesn't cause it. But God is here with us to help us to cope with those kinds of terrible tragedies. But at the same time, as we heard Jesus quickly add, we all need to repent and turn away from sin so that we can be reconciled to God and with one another.

The Good News of the Gospel, and of all of Scripture, is that our God is a God of 2nd Chances----3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th chances----our God is a God of limitless chances to turn away from sin, just like the barren fig tree in today's Gospel.

Pope Francis has called the entire Church and the whole world to celebrate a special Jubilee Year of Mercy. The primary purpose of this year is to remember that God NEVER turns His back on us. As He revealed to Moses in the Burning Bush today: "*I Am Who Am*".

God also told Moses: "*I have heard the cry of my people in Egypt*". God is a God of Mercy **and** a God of Compassion. As the Scriptures tell us so many times, "*God hears the cry of the poor*".

What that tells us about God is that God hears our cries----our needs----our concerns----our prayers. Why? Because He IS Who IS!

But God doesn't just "hear" the cries of His People; He wants to do something about it to help relieve His people's suffering. So what does He do? He touches the hearts of special

people and sends them in His name to relieve His people's suffering, injustice, and mistreatment.

That's what He did with Moses; God sent him to Pharaoh to demand that he let God's people go. That's what God did through all the Prophets, speaking directly to them, and asking them to speak to the people on God's behalf asking them to return to and follow Him.

Most dramatically of all---in the fullness of time---God sent His Son, Jesus into our world to be our Savior. Jesus is the One with Whom you have spent the grace-filled time of this weekend in His Presence---getting to know Him, and allowing Him to get to know you.

So, guess what. Jesus now wants to send *you*---each of you---back out into your families---into your schools---into all the aspects of your lives with your friends and in the midst of all your activities. Just like God has spoken through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob---just like God sent Moses, the Prophets and His own Son, Jesus---so too Jesus sends you to share the Good News of Jesus with those in your lives. He sends you, who have experienced God's Mercy, to also share God's mercy with others by treating them with compassion, and forgiving those who might hurt you. He sends you to be the witnesses of His love---His messengers of the Good News---He wants you to reveal His Presence in You.

My dear young people, just like Moses, you might very well be a little frightened and ask God how you can be up to such a big task. But God gives you the same answer He gave Moses: Don't be afraid---I Am Who Am, and I will remain with you always. And that's the very same thing that Jesus tells us and all His disciples: Do not be afraid. I am with you until the end of the ages. That is what "The Presence" is all about---taking away our fears and reminding us of God's amazing Love for each and every one of you, because Jesus IS the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus is the One Who is Present with us in His Word, in the Holy Eucharist, in the Sacraments, in the Church, and in and thru each and every one of us. And for that Good News and that reassurance, we respond with Joy: Thanks be to God-----Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!

God bless you, now and always!