

Training Camp

Intro. During the Olympics we hear how long and hard athletes have been training for their events, some of which are over in just seconds. Think of sledding or skiing. Four years of fasting and giving up a normal life; over in less than a minute! But for the winner it was worth it all.

I. Ash Wednesday means Easter is only a little more than a month away. It signifies the beginning of a *Christian* training camp of sorts during which we prepare to enter a brief week we call Holy, and hope to extend renewed habits of prayer, almsgiving and fasting beyond Easter Sunday to the rest of our lives. But without practice and discipline, that is as unlikely as making the Olympics without practicing.

Mark uses a very strong word to describe how the Lord went to the desert – “The Spirit **drove**” him out into the desert.” It refers to the *power* of the Holy Spirit leading him; not coercion or forcing the Lord where he didn’t want to go. He knew this was the starting point that would give him focus. The forty days recalls the testing of the Israelites in the desert before they could enter the Promised Land. Some translations say the Lord was “tempted,” which might lead us to think the Lord could be “induced” to sin. A better translation may be that he was “tested” [J.D./D.H., *Sacra Pagina*]. In the Old Testament Satan was thought to be a “member of the heavenly court who tests the fidelity of God’s chosen ones (see *the book of Job*).” In the *New Testament* Satan was understood as a demon [Ibid].

Mark does not tell us what specific tests the Lord faced. We believe him to be fully human, meaning he struggled with some of what we do. The use of power for self or to lash out at others who do not agree with us. Scripture *does* tell us he resisted those tests where we often *do not*.

Concl. The Lord went to a deserted place, free of the usual distractions of life, to prepare himself for the rigors of a three year marathon of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Most of us can't or won't go off for the next forty days to the desert to examine our consciences and repent. We have responsibilities here. We *could* however cut back on a few of our activities for the next forty days. That would make room for more prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We could put a few more **prayer** times in the Note, Reminder or Calendar app on our

phones. We could **fast** from some TV, games or social media surfing (but not homework or dishes or office work). *Volunteering* to do the dishes without being asked or told is a fair sacrifice for Lent as is saving some money every day to give to a project that feeds people who are hungry, which is called **almsgiving**. Those are the three pillars of Lent. At its conclusion, maybe we will have a better idea of how to proclaim the gospel. Athletes train for years; Lent is only a month. We are four/five days into it. It's a little more than a *sprint* and not quite a *marathon*. **We can help each other finish strong.**