

Focusing on the 'one thing necessary'

Watching television news and sports, I am amazed at the amount of information streaming across the screen — weather forecasts, scores, stock market quotes, headlines about a wide range of stories. Each stream distracts from the others, making it difficult to focus on any of them. Each network competes with the others using higher-tech distractions.

Have we become so mesmerized by diversions and distractions that they have become the point? The sheer volume of news and entertainment available at the flip of a switch seems to say that it is better to be distracted than focused.

I can conjure up enough distractions on my own, without any help from the media. I am distracted in prayer, in work, in reading, in driving, in conversation. I am distracted by hunger, by worry, by noise, by snow, by fatigue.

Sometimes people think it would be easier to avoid distractions if one joined a monastery. The Benedictine monks and nuns in Lacey and on Shaw Island will quickly tell you otherwise. Distractions follow us wherever we go.

Satan's empty promises

Distractions are an inevitable part of every person's life, but they are not the point of life. They enticingly pose as something — anything — that promises what it cannot deliver: nourishment.

In fact, if we constantly allow ourselves to bump from one distraction to another, we will never be at peace, and we will never find fulfillment. This is particularly true when we allow distractions to derail our relationship with God. The problem is that initially harmless distractions can entice us

away from what is good and cause us to do what is evil.

The First Sunday of Lent turned our attention to Jesus' 40 days' retreat into the desert, where he was tempted. Satan's goal was to exploit his hunger pangs in order to distract him from the Father, to trick him into going for the quick fix, to nudge him into claiming all the glory as his own.

Though buffeted by Satan's empty promises, Jesus remained grounded in his relationship with the Father, which he preferred to everything the world could offer.

We live at a time when distractions and temptations within are compounded by those constantly aimed at us from without. Thus, during Lent we deliberately go to the desert with Jesus — not to escape anything or anyone, but to seek the Father.

Nagging hunger pangs

We have allowed ourselves to be distracted by many things that have often kept us from our responsibilities and our spiritual lives. Some have led us to sin. We will never rid ourselves of all distractions and temptations, but we can deliberately shed some of them. Fasting, giving alms and praying are steps in that direction.

Fasting and abstaining from meat

make us hungry, but in truth those disciplines are just a small glimpse of what our Savior sacrificed for us. Almsgiving calls us away from selfish preoccupations and spurs us to active love for those who are hungry not because they have chosen to fast, but because they have no food. Prayer is the bread that feeds us, because it comes from the hand of the Father.

The nagging hunger pangs we feel during Lent are a helpful tool, for the desire for food is a symbolic reminder of the most basic human hunger — the hunger for a nourishing, intimate friendship with God. We hunger for it precisely because God extends his hand toward us.

Distractions are the junk food we use as a substitute. Temptations are Satan's ploy to discourage us and damage that friendship through sin.

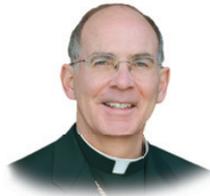
God unfailingly present

Is the point of Lent to focus on God by concentrating with furrowed brows, gritting our teeth and clenching our fists in fierce determination not to be distracted or tempted? Definitely not! Most of us have found that such effort soon ends in frustration.

Focusing on God is not so much a matter of concentration as it is of loving

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desire. When a sparse Lenten lunch makes us hungry about 2 p.m., we can say, "Lord, thank you for reminding me that it is really for you that I am hungry." When thoughts too numerous to count distract us, we can say, "Jesus, I love you," and let them pass in and out of our minds, disarming them of their influence.

When temptation threatens to draw our wills from friendship with God, we can say, "I worship and serve only you, my God."

Lent gives us the opportunity and the means to focus on the "one thing necessary" (see Luke 10:38-42) even in the midst of all that churns within and around us. It is our 40-day retreat into the desert to be with the Father.

Ironically, we get our bearings in the desert not by any map or skill of ours but by our helplessness and hunger. We will be distracted and tempted even there, but the Father is there awaiting us. He is unfailingly present to us in spite of all that may be going through our minds and hearts.

If he were not, we would cease to exist.

To whom else can we go? Our deepest hunger is for him.

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