



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The First Sunday of Lent

February 18, 2018

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Scriptures

On this first Sunday of Lent, we hear the conclusion of the story of Noah. Noah was a man who walked with God and found favor with him. All other people, however, had fallen into such wickedness and evil that God was grieved by his creation. He regretted ever having created humankind. God planned to wipe out the evil that overwhelmed his creation by sending a flood to cover the entire earth. The flood waters would cleanse God's creation, and remove evil so that all creation could be renewed. But God would not destroy the righteous Noah. He spared him and his family from the destruction of the flood. In thanksgiving, Noah offered a sacrifice, which was pleasing to God. In response, God promised never again to send a flood to destroy his creation.

Jesus' earliest believers saw a link between the waters of that flood and baptism. Early Christians understood from Scripture that water *destroys* (think: Noah's flood and Pharaoh's army) but it also *saves*. St. Peter writes that the flood prefigured the waters of Baptism. The flood waters that wiped out evil from the earth also carried Noah to safety and a new life. Christians believe that the water of Baptism also brings a kind of death and renewal: when we are baptized, our old selves-- chained to sin without any hope of escaping its destruction--die with Jesus, then rise to new life in him.

Today's very brief Gospel tells of Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the desert and the beginning of his ministry. Mark provided only a few details of Jesus' period of temptation. In just a few words, we learn that God's own Spirit drove Jesus, a righteous man without sin, into the desert to suffer and struggle with temptation as others humans do. After he emerged, he would announce to the unrighteous that God's reign had begun. Every person was invited to hear his good news so that they might turn to God and find redemption.

Today's readings remind us of God's lopsided efforts to save us. He makes covenants with his people and keeps them. He constantly promises to save his sinful, faithless people, not to punish or destroy them. St. Peter writes that Jesus came to lead us to God and that Jesus was willing to endure suffering and death in order to accomplish this. Our journey back to the Father starts with Jesus' invitation to believe and repent. The Church repeats that invitation in Lent. How we respond is entirely up to us.

Alpha begins this Tuesday, February 20. Come and hear the good news of Jesus for yourself! Register today.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Genesis 9:8-15

I am setting my covenant with you forever!

- The first reading is the conclusion of the Noah story. The event takes place after the flood waters had receded.
- God makes a covenant with Noah and, through Noah, with all creation.
- For the author's audience, whose world had seemed destroyed through exile, the story of God's covenant with Noah established new hope.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 25: 4-5, 6-7, 8-9.

Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenants.

Reading II: 1 Peter 3:18-22

You are saved by your baptisms!

- The First Letter of Peter uses the imagery of the flood and the covenant with Noah as a symbol of Baptism.
- This letter was written to encourage Christians in the face of persecution.
- Today's passage presents Christ's death and resurrection as the true reason for deliverance from sin and death.

Gospel: Mark 1:12-15

Jesus was sent by the Spirit into the desert.

- The story of the temptation of Jesus is told on the First Sunday of Lent every year.
- Mark's brief account brings to mind figures and events from the Hebrew Scriptures.
- After Jesus' baptism, the Spirit who had descended upon him drove him into the desert to be tempted by Satan. Today's Gospel relates to Baptism and its meaning.

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Teach Me Your Ways

When we were teenagers, my brother and I spent a lot of time playing the guitar and singing the folk songs of the day. Our parents loved our singing, but Mom couldn't bear to hear us sing songs about war, especially the laments over the dead or soldiers who came home maimed. We weren't allowed to sing them in her presence. When Mom heard of someone who had died in Viet Nam, she would visibly choke up for a moment and then quietly say something like "God be with his poor wife and children."

Mom was a young wife with an infant boy on the day she saw her husband go off to World War II. Every day from the time Dad left until the moment she saw him get off the train in Denver in 1945, she prayed, worried and lived with a hole in her heart. Anytime she heard of others living through the same thing, she got tears in her eyes. She really did share their pain. That is what compassion means.

In today's psalm, we pray to learn God's ways. We sing of God's compassion and mercy, of God's love and goodness. Then, we blithely ask to share those. As Jesus warned James and John, we may not know what we are asking.

When we ask God, "Teach me your paths," we are opening ourselves to existential knowledge of divine compassion. That is a highfalutin way of saying we want to understand God's ways in our flesh — in our heart and guts as well as in our minds. We want to be moved by the same loving identification with others that moves God's saving love for us. We are offering ourselves to cry God's tears which, like everything else divine, are without measure. Of course, the other side of it is that we are also asking to rejoice with God's own joy.

Today's Gospel gives us two segments in one Gospel reading, both of them short. First, we hear that the Spirit compelled Jesus to go to the desert where he struggled with everything that it means to be human. How was Jesus tested? Mark only tells us that he found himself between the Spirit and Satan, between the wild beasts and the angels.

C. S. Lewis may have been thinking of Jesus' test when he wrote in *The Screwtape Letters* that human beings are "amphibians — half spirit and half animal." Lewis said that we belong to both time and eternity, and that finding our balance in those two dimensions, learning how to be embodied spirits, or divinely-inspired persons of flesh and blood, is the goal of human life. In *The Screwtape Letters*,

Lewis portrays a tutor devil, Screwtape, instructing his neophyte nephew demon about how to waylay human beings from their core vocation as images of God. He told his nephew that the task is to get them to fixate on just one or the other of the dimensions of their nature, the spirit or the flesh. According to Screwtape, body-denying attempts at holiness are as much a betrayal of the human vocation as is licentiousness with no regard for the human spirit. Both deny true humanity and bring misery in their wake. Jesus' desert test seems to have entailed precisely that core human struggle. Jesus was grappling with how to be a true Son of God, a person of flesh and blood, consciously and willingly inhabited by God.

In the second, but intimately connected Gospel that we hear today, Jesus emerged from the desert with his own answer to the human dilemma. He called it the Gospel, or the good news of God. That Gospel was Jesus' awareness that the reign of God was at hand precisely because God was at hand. Jesus took what Israel had ever dreamed of, God's dwelling among humankind, and proclaimed that it was a reality that everyone could experience if only they were open to it. The reign of God that Jesus proclaimed is a spiritual reality that exists in time and space. It is the truly human way of living, being willingly loved and loving inspired creatures.

The offer Jesus made to people was really very simple — and life changing: "Repent and believe." What that really meant was "Take on a new perspective! Believe what I am saying about God and about humanity!" Jesus, the Son of God, understood God's love for humanity and all of what human beings were capable. He saw that his mission was to make God's love present and to share his status as God's Son with all of humanity. He knew it was possible, and he also knew that it would come at the cost of true compassion. Those who accept Jesus' offer will cry with God's own tears of sorrow and of joy.

Sr. Mary McGlone

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