

First Sunday of Lent Cycle B
Gn 9:8-15; 1 Pt 3:18-22; Mk 1:12-15
February 18, 2024

Of all the seasons of the Church year, Lent is the oldest and the most striking. The color purple, the ashes, fish on Friday, Stations of the Cross and “giving up something for Lent” all bring to mind powerful and shared memories. In today’s Gospel, Jesus goes into the desert for forty days and, during Lent, we do so as well. During these forty days, we try to go back to basics, to breathe new life into our Christian identity. We make a fresh start.

A fresh start is what the story of Noah is about. It is not difficult for us to understand the fear that the ancients had of floods, typhoons, or a torrential rain. Water could wipe out entire villages, towns and civilizations. Whether it was sudden or gradual, the rising water threatened to destroy everything in sight. In the videos and pictures of the Tsunami that happened a few years ago, we saw the power of water to destroy.

Noah and his family were safe because they were in the ark that rode above the waters. After the rains stopped, they saw the rainbow, a promise of a new beginning, and a sign to the human race of God’s promise to bring salvation to those who repent and are faithful to him. It is still impressive to us to see a rainbow. The rainbow reminded the people of Israel that whatever the weather or storms they experienced, God is faithful. The ark and the rainbow are two signs of God’s salvation.

We are still afraid of floods, but there are other powerful and rising waters around that can destroy lives and families just as tragically. These are the waters of greed, lust, drugs, alcohol, gambling, and, materialism.

I am sure all of us know people with great promise whose lives and families have been destroyed by one or more of these vices.

It is difficult to raise a family today, to stay true to our values, to sustain a marriage vow. Like Noah, we have been given an ark, the Church. Like Noah’s ark, the Church carries us over the troubled waters as a place of safety. We find that ark in the community of faith into which we were baptized. Our rainbow sign is the Eucharist, God’s enduring promise to remain faithful to us in any storm, to help us stay on course above the difficult waters.

A question remains for each of us. Are WE still in the ark? That is what Lent is about. Lent is not about God's fidelity, but about ours. Lent is a time to revive our Christian life and see whether we are still in the ark or whether we are trying to swim the waters all by ourselves. We examine our Christian life through the traditional practices of Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Lent is a time to examine our prayer life. How do we pray? When do we pray?

Are we simply reciting prayers, or are we truly in communion with God? How often do we pray? Is it only in emergencies, during family or work difficulties, illnesses, or is prayer a daily practice in our life?

Our prayer life reflects a relationship with God that is intensely personal. No one can do our praying for us. Lent gives us a time to diagnose the health of our prayer life.

Fasting and abstinence are wonderful practices during Lent. Fasting purifies the body and the soul.

Fasting and abstinence reveal our real weakness. What are we giving up for Lent? What positive action or actions are we taking during this time?

Although it is commendable (admirable) to give up negative and un-Christian attitudes during Lent, fasting is a very concrete indicator of our will power. Fasting makes us face the pattern of our consumption and the power of a consumer culture in our life.

The practice of almsgiving or works of charity take us out of the shell of our private life to tackle the wider world of need that surrounds us.

It reminds us that we have a responsibility for our brothers and sisters. Our acts of charity help to shape the kind of society in which we live.

The Sundays of Lent this year center on the theme of covenant. There is the Old Covenant that is made, broken, and renewed, again and again in the Old Testament. There is the New Covenant given to us in Jesus the Christ, a covenant we were made part of when we were baptized. The new covenant Jesus' brings is like that of a faithful spouse: who is with us for better or for worse, in sickness or in health, for richer or for poorer. Can we say that about our response?

Often, when we drift from God, we begin looking for His love, an all-encompassing, no strings attached love, in all the wrong places and we are consistently disappointed. Lent is the time for each of us to renew our faithfulness to God, to regain our place in the ark of his Church and live

our lives under his rainbow sign.

Prayer, fasting, and acts of charity are ways of evaluating and reviving our fidelity to Jesus. God is faithful to us. Are we in the ark, or are we trying to swim the waters around us alone?

Lent opens the door for us to enter the ark once again. From within the ark, we behold the rainbow sign of the Eucharist telling us that we are never alone.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.