

How are we, as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, to live as true daughters and sons of God, people of flesh and blood, willingly and consciously inhabited by God? Put another way: How do we merge or reconcile our humanity and our divinity and live that out in the world? That's the question I think we should be asking ourselves at the beginning of this Lenten season. And just as we often tend to focus more on Jesus' divinity over his humanity, for ourselves we often neglect our own divinity over our humanity. We fail to recognize that we are eternal beings. Unlike God, who always was, is now, and always will be, we are now and always will be. This is the gift God offered us in creation. This is the gift we received through our baptism. This is the gift we are given to nurture. Listen to all the ways in our liturgy and in our prayers that we reflect on this gift of everlasting life.

We prayed in the first line of the first verse of the Psalm today, **"Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths."** This should be on my bathroom mirror! I should make it my computer background image, the scripture passage for centering prayer. It should be on the kiosks in the gathering space, a constant reminder that our time here on this earth is to make God's ways our ways. That's our mission.

Lent isn't just a time for us to make sacrifices and pray so that we might build our own character. Lent is about how we can be closer to God at the end of Lent than we were at the beginning.

Much, if not most, of the Bible is written after the fact. The stories are told to explain more current events in light of the relationship of God with God's people. They answer the question: "How is God present with us?" The story of Noah from our first reading was most likely written during the exile of the Jewish people into Babylon. They believed that their sinfulness had raised God's anger toward them, allowing them to be overtaken by their enemy. Noah and the other seven who were saved with him, represent the righteous, those who were faithful. Their being saved and the covenant God makes with Noah to never again destroy the world by flood, is symbolized by the rainbow.

In the other ancient near-eastern texts, parallel stories of people who lived at the same time as our Hebrew Testament ancestors, there are also stories of a great flood. And in those stories, the rainbow is seen as a weapon of the gods, something to be feared. The Hebrew writer in Genesis turns the rainbow into an image of hope, a way to give hope to a people who were forced from their homes, forced from their country, dragged away to live in a foreign land as slaves to their conqueror. Each time they saw the rainbow, after the darkness of storms, it was to be a reminder that God takes care of the righteous, the faithful. It was a call for them to return to faithfulness. **"Your ways, O Lord, make known to me. Teach me your paths."**

All the years I was teaching, I tried to create an environment for my adult learners that helped them de-stress from their long days at work. Classes met for four-hour blocks, once a week, after a long work day. I gave them the opportunity to bring things in to the classroom that would help them relieve that stress. One student brought in a Stretch

Armstrong figure. Anybody remember Stretch Armstrong? He was an action figure, made of plastic, rubber and gel. You could stretch his arms, legs, and torso up to 4 times their original size; you could tie him in knots . . . and he would eventually always return to his original size and shape.

In today's Gospel from Mark, a man of few words, we hear of Jesus' being led into the desert to be tempted by Satan. There were wild beasts and angels present, Mark's way of proposing that Jesus was in a battle of good versus evil. Jesus was like Stretch Armstrong, pulled from both sides, stretched by the forces of the devil, tempted just as we are tempted. Jesus was also ministered to by angels, representing good, representing God. Unlike Matthew and Luke, who tell us outright that Jesus sent the devil off with his tail between his legs, Mark doesn't come right out and tell us that Jesus was successful. The devil will return in Mark's gospel and tempt Jesus again and again in different ways. We can assume from the second section of the gospel today that Jesus was stretched but not broken. The devil may have attempted to tie him in knots, but his proclamation of the inbreaking of the time of fulfillment – the Kingdom of God -- is evidence enough that Jesus resisted.

In his announcement, Jesus proclaims two imperatives: Repent and believe. That was then. It is no different now. We find ourselves in a wilderness, the place of testing. As with Noah and the 40 days of rain and flood, as with Jesus and the 40 days in the desert, we find ourselves in this season of 40 days, just the right amount of time, in which we are to wrestle with the beasts and the angels, remembering our humanity **and** our divinity, and recalling that, like our Jewish ancestors, because we haven't always resisted temptation, because we still may not have figured out our place in the world, or we aren't yet willing to accept it, we often bring chaos back into it, we continuously need to repent and believe. We are called to change our minds and reinforce our wills. Like Stretch Armstrong, we must try to not break so we can return to where God intended us to be.

The beasts of the wilderness, the tools of the devil, are all around us: self-indulgence, pettiness, greed, desire, gossip, envy, judgmentalism, lust, prejudice, cruelty . . . these are just a few of the many temptations that pull at us. At the same time, there are Angels ready to help us, we know them: compassion, mercy, tenderness, charity, honesty, generosity, prayer, integrity, love, to name just a few.

Lent is a time to put things back in order, to turn away from our beasts and turn toward our angels, toward the good, toward Jesus, toward God. Jesus understood the love of God, in his divinity. In his humanity, Jesus understood all that humans were capable of accomplishing. **“Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths.”** This prayer is our admission that we don't yet fully know God's ways. When we say this prayer, we are praying for a conversion that will turn us away from focusing on ourselves and our personal vision of happiness, the things we figure are good for us and our cause. We don't necessarily see these as “of the devil” because we do choose them, and often. Unfortunately, what we believe will make us happy truly doesn't. The things we think are good for us often aren't. The things we choose because we think

they will bring us enjoyment are an illusion. We feel Satan stretching us, and we think that it is good.

It's important for us to face our life squarely and admit three things:

evil is real

the good are not as smart as they think they are

the good need all the help they can get; we can't be good on our own.

Jesus came to teach us God's paths so that we would be open to be compassionate as God is compassionate; to understand God's ways in our flesh, in our hearts, in our guts and in our minds, to be able to tell the difference between the ways of the Devil and the ways of God.

As God loves **us**, we want to love others. I think we often have a hard time remembering and believing that God could love us. **"Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths,"** we hear Jesus telling us that we can do it. He showed us how we can do it. We can make God's ways our ways – by keeping the new covenant with God, the new covenant that is Jesus. We can do this by remembering the three Lenten disciplines we heard Jesus proclaim in the gospel for Ash Wednesday: fasting (and this is not just limited to food but to anything that might get in the way of our relationship with God); almsgiving (and this is not limited to money, it can be reflected in how we give of ourselves in other ways, like time and talent); and finally, prayer, which is a major theme or focus for us at St. Peter's this Lenten season: how to grow in our prayerfulness.

On this day in dioceses around the world, those who have entered into a formal process of entry into the church, those who are unbaptized (we call them catechumens) and those who are baptized in another Christian tradition (we call them candidates) gather with their bishops in diocesan cathedrals, and celebrate the Rite of Election. Their final preparations take place during Lent, which for them, as it should be for us, is a period of Enlightenment and Purification. As part of your Lenten prayer focus, I urge each of you to offer prayers to our God in support of these candidates and catechumens, who have joined with us in the battle between good and evil. May they choose the path of life.

And let your daily prayer for yourselves echo the words from today's psalm:

**"Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths."**