

LENT

Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter. The Lenten liturgy disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own baptism and through penitential practices. (*General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, #27)

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends prior to the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. The word Lent is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *lencten* or springtime. In Christian spirituality, the season of Lent is intended to be a spiritual springtime for the unbaptized (called *Elect*) and also for the baptized. On Ash Wednesday, when our Lenten journey begins, the prophet Joel says to us: "*Rend your hearts, not your garments.*" Commenting on these words from the first reading, Thomas Merton writes: "*Rending only your garments lets in nothing but air, rending our hearts lets out sin and lets in the clean air of God's spring.*"

Baptismal focus

In the early centuries of the Church when the catechumenate developed, Lent was the final period of preparation for the unbaptized who were discerned to be ready for full initiation into the Church on Easter Vigil. For the already baptized, Lent was an opportunity to deepen their baptismal commitment to Christ. The baptismal focus has been restored in our own time.

Living Lent

If we embrace the baptismal focus of Lent, it will most likely change the way we approach the season. The emphasis will not be primarily on giving up something but rather our doing whatever will deepen our baptismal commitment to Christ.

Lent rooted in Baptism will mean taking a serious look at where there is sin in our lives, where there is need for repentance and conversion, where there is need to weed out, with God's help, sinful attitudes and behaviors that hinder us from being more effective witnesses to Christ and his message.

Practicing the three traditional spiritual exercises of *prayer, fasting and almsgiving* (Mt 6:1-13) can be a big help as we seek to prepare for Baptism or for renewal of our baptismal commitment to Christ. Properly approached and utilized, prayer, fasting and almsgiving will facilitate a change of heart and behavior in our lives.

In and through *authentic prayer*, we create a space for God in our lives and allow him to have his way with us. In prayer, we open ourselves to God asking him to show us where there is sin in our lives and where there is need for conversion and healing. Through *fasting* from certain foods and drinks, we allow ourselves to experience in a small way the extreme hunger that millions of people in our world experience daily. We can also fast from excessive use of television, radio and internet, and from sins of the tongue. In the spiritual life, fasting is never an end in itself. It is intended to facilitate a closer walk with Christ and a greater solidarity with the poor. Through *almsgiving*, we also express oneness with our less fortunate brothers and sisters all over the world. In many parishes, *Operation Rice Bowl*, a ministry of *Catholic Relief Services*, is a way to connect with the poor of the world.

Two final suggestions for living the Spirit of Lent— First, receive the *Sacrament of Reconciliation*. Fruitful reception of this sacrament will certainly ready our hearts on Easter Vigil to say a stronger 'No!' to Satan and sin, and a stronger 'Yes!' to Jesus and all that he stands for. Second, take time to pray the *Stations of the Cross*, making a special effort to experience the immense suffering of our beloved Savior as he poured out his life for us that we might experience the abundance of God's love and salvation.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

February 21, 2021 B

Note to Facilitator: If possible, set up a Lenten environment in the center of your meeting place, e.g., a purple cloth placed on a small table, an open Bible, a candle, a barren branch, a bowl of water to remind us that we are preparing to renew our baptismal promises at Easter.

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge* that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Creator God, you formed the first man and woman from the clay of the earth and breathed into them the Spirit of Life, but they turned from you and sinned. We have also turned from you and your ways. During this Lenten season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, you call us back to you and to repent of our sins. Be with us when we face temptations. Give us the strength we need to remain faithful to you. Draw the “Elect” preparing to join the Church this Easter, and all of us, closer to you during this season. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week’s Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week’s Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The Cycle B readings of Lent have a strong emphasis on the covenant and renewal of the covenant between God and his people. This covenant theme is particularly evident in several of the first readings. During this Lenten season, God is calling us to renew and deepen our covenantal relationship with him. Also during this season, we join in prayerful spirit with the “Elect” who are preparing for initiation into our Church. We also prepare to renew and deepen our baptismal commitment to God and his Church.

In this week’s first reading, God makes a covenant with all of creation promising never to destroy it again as he did in the Great Flood. In the second reading, Peter sees the cleansing water of the Flood as a prefigurement of the cleansing waters of baptism. In the Gospel, we encounter Jesus out in the desert fighting the powers of evil. The readings can also be seen in the context of *how we live our lives in the midst of conflict*. In the first reading, people are dealing with the conflict that follows a natural disaster. The second reading focuses on the spiritual conflict between right and wrong. The Gospel has Jesus in conflict with Satan.

Let us listen to God’s Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Genesis 9:8-15

The story of Noah and the great flood begins in Genesis 6:5. As we join the story in this reading, the flood is over and Noah, his family and all the animals are back on dry land.

God enters into a covenant not only with Noah but also with all his descendants and with all living creatures. Note the universal character of the covenant. The idea of covenant is central to Scripture, both Old and New Testament. In fact, the words *covenant* and *testament* are the same. A covenant commits one to remain faithful when even the other party is unfaithful. God will remain faithful to us even if we are unfaithful to him. Today’s reading also emphasizes the permanence

of the covenant. God tells Noah that never again shall water cover the earth.

The *rainbow* in the sky is intended to be a visible sign of the covenant between God and humanity. It is also a sign of God’s presence and serves as a reminder to the people of their responsibilities before God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 25

The author is seeking divine guidance, remembering God’s compassion especially for sinners and for the humble.

SECOND READING: 1Peter 3:18-22

This reading may have been part of an instruction on baptism in the Early Church. The key point of the instruction reminds us of the efficacy of Christ's suffering and death. Through his death and Resurrection, all have access to God. The reference to Christ preaching to the "spirits in prison" has baffled biblical scholars for years. Concerning this verse, Scripture scholar Margaret Nutting Ralph writes: "*Jesus' redemptive power extends to the spirit world and over all times. Salvation is offered not just to those who lived after Jesus' life and death on earth, but to all who ever lived.*"

The author then goes on to contrast the waters of the Flood to the waters of baptism. (Both the New Testament writers and the Early Church Fathers looked to the Old Testament for hidden signs and symbols that foreshadowed and prepared the way for events and teachings in the life of Christ and his Church.) Just as Noah saved others from the devastating waters of the Flood, so Christ saves us from the ultimate destruction of separation from God. Peter then insists that baptism is not just some external cleansing. Rather, it brings about an inner transformation making us like Christ. Remember the old definition of a sacrament? It is an outward sign (in Baptism, this is water) signifying an inner reality (in Baptism, it is cleansing the soul of sin and filling it with the grace or the life of Christ).

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Mark 1:12-15

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Mark 1:12-15

Today's Gospel reading begins with Mark's account of Jesus' temptation in the desert. Unlike Matthew's or Luke's accounts, both of which detail the specific temptations that Jesus experienced, Mark tells us only that the "Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him."

The reference to "wild beasts" is intended to communicate the savage nature of the temptations. "Angels ministering" to Jesus is a reminder of how the angel has visited Elijah in his time of trial, bringing him bread and water. It is possible that Mark is seeking to convey to his community that in times of trial and testing, Jesus will also be present to sustain them.

After his time in the desert is completed, Jesus begins his public ministry. His first words are: "*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.*" Jesus' pronouncement of "*the time of fulfillment*" signifies that Israel's long time of waiting for a decisive entrance by God on their behalf has come. Many people believe that the Messiah will be another David-like warrior who will drive out the Romans. But as they will find out soon, Jesus will be a peaceful Messiah. Not only that, but for one to avail of all that he brings, one will need to *repent* and embrace the Gospel that he preaches.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In the Great Flood, God cleanses creation polluted by sin. How do we pollute creation today? How aware are you of environmental issues? Do you recycle? Do you conserve water and use reusable items?
3. In the second reading, Peter speaks of baptism. What does being a baptized Catholic mean to you? Do you know the date of your Baptism? If not, consider finding it out.
4. Some, if not many people find it hard to believe that Jesus was really tempted to go against his Father's will for his life. Any comments on this? Does the reality of Jesus' temptations make it easier to believe that Jesus was like us in all things except sin?
5. Jesus' temptations reminds us that the spiritual life is indeed spiritual warfare. Our nobler or Christ self is engaged in a fierce battle with the world the flesh and the devil. How does this play out in your life? If possible be concrete. For example, a part of us may not want to forgive a hurt or share our blessings with others.

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, you know my weaknesses and temptations to sin, help me to be strong and resist.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Reflect on how Satan might be trying to pull you away from Christ and his ways. What will help you resist his temptations and allurements? Can you name one way you can respond to or put into action a message in today's readings?

CONCLUDING PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we need to pray?

Each gathering ends with some prayers of *petition* (prayer for oneself) and *intercession* (prayer for others). Ideally, this would include prayers related to the readings. Some suggestions are usually offered. Since Lent is a time of final preparation for the Elect's Baptism and entrance into the Church, keep them in your prayers. Pray also for all who are battling with floods, literally or metaphorically.

CLOSING PRAYER (Together)

*Blessed are you, God of Creation,
for you have placed us in a world of wonders
and then sent your Son to redeem us
and teach us your wisdom.*

Help us to use your gifts as you intend.

*Draw the Elect and all of us closer
to you in this holy season.*

*We make our prayer
through Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

Lessons from Noah's Ark

One: Don't miss the boat.

Two: Remember that we are all in the same boat.

Three: Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.

Four: Stay fit. When you are old, someone may ask you to do something really big.

Five: Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done.

Six: Build your future on high ground.

Seven: For safety's sake, travel in pairs.

Eight: Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.

Nine: When you're stressed, float a while.

Ten: Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.

Eleven: No matter the storm, when you are with God, there's always a rainbow waiting.