

1st Sunday of Lent

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READINGS

Genesis 9:8-15
Psalms 25:4-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15

OPENING PRAYER

God our Loving Father, help us to enter this Lenten journey with open minds and hearts as we strive to prepare to celebrate the great Paschal Feast of Easter. Amen.

COMMENTARY ON THE WORD OF GOD

Today's first reading tells us how God saved Noah and his family from the flood and made a covenant with him. In the second reading from the First Letter of Peter, we are told that this prefigured our baptism, which saves us now. The Gospel proclaims that the kingdom of God is at hand. The season of Lent offers us time to reflect on what God has done for us and to respond by our doing and being.

GOD'S PROMISE

The Noah story in Genesis tells us of God's desire to save us. Let us open our hearts and minds to the salvation God offers us by considering the symbols of Noah's Ark and the rainbow.

The waters of the flood obliterated the world that was. The ark (an ancient symbol for the church) contained many rooms with space for people and animals. After the flood, Noah and his family stepped into a new world that they had to develop. In the sky above the receding waters, they witnessed a rainbow, which was a sign of the covenant of God with Noah to never again destroy the earth by a flood. A rainbow is a phenomenon we see in the blue sky after a rainstorm. We call our children to come and see. The brilliant colors of the rainbow can lead us, legend says, to a pot of gold.

Recently, the mighty Mississippi flooded large sections of our country. Tornados flattened entire communities. An oil spill changed life on the Gulf Coast in many sundry ways. Modern people had to develop a new

world out of the ruin wrought by these natural ravages. Did God fail in his promise? How readily we blame God!

We, the Church, are the new "ark" in today's world. We must extend God's saving love to all who seek it. The ark sailed through destruction and death. The church today is surrounded by destruction and death, which makes us fearful of salvation for today's world. The church proffers a treasure that is not physical like the pot of gold, but a spiritual treasure trove. Each one of us must invite others to come and see this treasure. The Paschal Mystery displays the bright lights of various colors of the myriad ways salvation is offered to us through the portal of our baptism.

Lent does not point our gaze downward to death and destruction, but onward to the grace and glory of the Paschal mystery.

GOD SAVES

The second reading from the First Letter of Peter tells us that baptism, which the waters of the flood prefigured, saves us – "not as a removal of dirt from the body, but an appeal to God...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 3:21b) People cannot live as a dichotomy of body and soul. When the soul is separated from the body, the person is dead. The church uses physical signs for each of the seven sacraments as well as the physical settings of our places of worship for the spiritual graces God extends to us.

The reading from the First Letter of Peter also tells us that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father in heaven, interceding for us. The Incarnation drew Jesus into fleshly existence and he lived among us, like us in all things except sin. Now his intercession for us draws us all into God's unconditional love.

GOD SPEAKS TO OUR HEART

Today's Gospel tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert where he was tempted. When temptations come, as they inevitably do, at times we might feel that the God of the covenant is far from us. However, God is never far from us. He carries us in our darkest times. The author of the poem "Footprints" describes this experience graphically for us.

On Ash Wednesday, we heard the ending exhortation of today's gospel: "Repent and believe in the Gospel (good news)." Mark 1:15 After the forty days of Lent, we will renew our baptismal promises on Holy Saturday night in the light of candles in the darkness of night. Think of Lent as a preparation for this renewal.

GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

The good news is that God has established a relationship of love with us. Several solemn promises or covenants are described in Scripture. Today's first reading describes the covenant, which God made with Noah. This covenant was a solemn bond created between a more powerful One (God) and those he protects (Noah and his family). Our baptism bonded us in a solemn covenant with God in a relationship of unconditional love.

We respond by our doing and being. It is customary to select a Lenten practice, something we can do to prepare ourselves to relate to God in love. The Lenten practice is not a spiritual gymnastics exercise so that we have physical proof of our prowess in fasting; giving up candy, beer, or cigarettes; or even going to daily Mass all Lent long. Rather these practices are designed to open our hearts and minds to God's love.

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) This is the essence of our being during Lent - sons and daughters of God with whom God is well pleased. Baptism commissions us to a mission in the church and in the world. Go out and proclaim the good news in all you do and are.

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MEMORY VERSE

*"The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent, and believe in the gospel."* Mark 1:15

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

Share and/or discuss the following questions.

1. The commentary writer states that our baptism bonded us in a solemn covenant with God in a relationship of unconditional love. How can the acceptance of my woundedness prepare me to acknowledge God's unconditional love for me? Discuss.
2. Baptism also commissions me to a mission in the church and in the world. How do I go out and proclaim the good news in all I do and am?
3. When disaster strikes, what has been my response?
4. The author of the poem "Footprints" says that God carries us in our darkest times. Has this been my experience? Share.
5. How will my Lenten practice/s open my heart and mind to God's love?

SAINT OF THE WEEK

SAINT PORPHYRY OF GAZA

Feast Day - February 26

In this Sunday's Gospel, we hear that Jesus was "proclaiming the good news of God." In the fourth century Saint Porphyry spent his life proclaiming the good news of God to the pagans in Greece. At 40 years of age, he was ordained a priest and chosen to be a bishop. Since Porphyry was reluctant, he was kidnapped by a bishop and forced to become a bishop. The first challenge that he faced as bishop was an accusation by the pagan neighbors that he was responsible for a drought that they were experiencing. God heard his prayers and sent down the rain! Let us pray to St. Porphyry for help in sharing the good news of Jesus to our friends and neighbors. In times of drought, let us remember to ask St. Porphyry to intercede with God for us!

LIVING AS DISCIPLES

Select one or more of the following actions and be prepared to share your experience with your small group next week.

1. Find a city or county that has recently been affected by a flood or another natural disaster and respond by offering assistance to those in need.
2. Start a Lenten journal to write and reflect on your practices of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving for the next six weeks.
3. Spend time in prayer reflecting and offering thanks to God for the relationship you have been gifted with in baptism.
4. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or another organization that helps people in need.

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5. Each time you go to church and make the sign of the cross with holy water, thank God for the spiritual graces that you received through your baptism.
6. Spend time reflecting on the memory verse Mark 1:15 and list ways that you are living this command of Jesus.

CLOSING PRAYER & RITUAL

Gather around a prayer table with a Bible, crucifix, a large lit candle, and a bowl of water. Provide pens/pencils and an index card for each person.

All: Dear, God, help us to keep our Lenten resolutions as we begin this six-week spiritual journey to Easter.

Play soft music while each person writes a note on an index card to God about his/her Lenten resolution/s to fast, pray, and give alms.

After notes are written, the leader will use the water to offer a blessing to each person using the following words.

Leader: (name), may this water be a reminder of the graces you received at your baptism, which will help you to live your Lenten resolutions.

Response: Amen.

Concluding Prayer: God of the Covenant, enable us to see our covenant relationship with you, as initiated in our baptism. As Noah and his family were saved in the ark, you God save us through the Sacrament of Baptism as administered by your Church. Amen.

Share a sign of peace with one another. Notes are to be taken home as a reminder of Lenten resolutions.