

1st Sunday of Lent – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Genesis 9:8-15

On this 1st Sunday in Lent, we look back to the covenant between God and Noah. In passing through the waters, Noah became aware of his relationship with God, and the rainbow became the sign of that covenant relationship.

⁸ God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ “See,

God is fulfilling His promise of Genesis 6:18-21.

I am now establishing my covenant with you

More than the promise of Genesis 6:18, a covenant makes them part of God’s family and thus under His protection.

and your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you: all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals that were with you and came out of the ark. ¹¹ I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth.”

This covenant, like all covenants, is perpetual – it has no time limit; and like all covenants, it also has associated with it blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The covenant is extended to all creation and although unilateral, initiated and instituted by God, it implicitly requires Noah and his descendants to obey (just as Noah and his family had done when they climbed aboard the ark). If they don’t obey, they won’t be flooded again, but other calamities (curses) will befall them. Because only mankind is made by God with a soul (made in God’s image), only mankind who disobeyed in the original sin, is required to be obedient.

¹² God added: “This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: ¹³ I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

The rainbow is the sign of this covenant. All covenants have visible signs, whether they be circumcision, rainbows, or the waters of baptism. For the ancient pagans, the rainbow was a sign of the god’s displeasure and it was used to inflict divine punishment. Now, God uses this sign to indicate His appeasement.

14 When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, 15 I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings.

Does God forget? No, the sign is not for God's benefit, but for man to see and recall God's goodness.

2nd Reading - 1 Peter 3:18-22

This first letter of Peter was written around A.D. 64 to the people of God scattered throughout the wide area of Asia Minor. It is not addressed to any specific person or congregation. These people of God are thought to be of Gentile origin because this area was not known as a Jewish land or known to have been heavily settled by Jews.

The letter was sent by Saint Peter from Rome to console and strengthen these Christians in the new life to which they have been introduced by baptism. The disparagement, suffering and persecution which these people are encountering appears to have been coming from their pagan neighbors who revile them and abuse them for the "name of Christ" (4:14). Saint Peter writes to urge them to be faithful to their calling, seeing that they are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (2:9).

In our reading today, Saint Paul is reminding them of the effect of their baptism – they now bear the sign of the covenant upon their soul.

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God.

Christ had an earthly life but His sacrifice on the altar of the cross was so that heaven could be opened and we could approach God. Jesus' sacrifice for the sins of all humanity has made it possible for us all to have our sins forgiven and forgotten.

Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the spirit.

In contrast to His earthly life, at the resurrection, Jesus became *pneuma* (breath, spirit). He was raised by the Father's glory and endowed with the power which enables Him to bring others to the divine life. Contrasting of Jesus' earthly and divine life is a tool also used in Romans (1:34) and 1 Timothy (3:16).

19 In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison,

To the souls in sheol (hades, purgatory), the abode of the dead. All the souls who were destined for heaven but could not yet enter because heaven was closed. Josephus, a first century Pharisee and historian, gives us this description of sheol:

“Now as to Hades, wherein the souls of the righteous and unrighteous are detained ... a place in the world not regularly finished; a subterraneous region, wherein the light of this world does not shine ... This region is allotted as a place of custody for souls, in which angels are appointed as guardians to them, who distribute to them temporary punishments, agreeable to everyone’s behavior and manners ... it is prepared for a day afore determined by God, in which one righteous sentence shall deservedly be passed upon all men; when the unjust and those that have been disobedient to God ... shall be adjudged to ... everlasting punishment ... while the just shall obtain an incorruptible and never-fading kingdom. These are now indeed confined in Hades, but not in the same place wherein the unjust are confined.” [Flavius Josephus (ca. A.D. 70), *Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*, 1-2]

Although the reading says He went to “preach” to these souls, it might be better said that He “announced” that He had triumphed – He had made the sacrifice which had opened heaven.

“Christ descended into hades in order to acquaint the patriarchs and prophets with His redeeming mission.” [Tertullian (between A.D. 208-212), *The Soul* 55,2]

20 who had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark,

According to the Gospel of Thomas (an apocryphal writing) chapter 19, Jesus took Adam by the hand and all the rest of the saints joined hands and ascended with Him to paradise where they met Enoch, Elijah, and the good thief.

in which a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water.

It is interesting that the Chinese character for “large ship” is made up of the characters for “eight souls.”

21 This prefigured baptism, which saves you now.

Notice how Saint Peter draws the parallel between baptism and Noah’s escape. The flood was a prototype of baptism.

“The water of the flood is a type of baptism because it both punished evil people and saved the good, just as baptism expels evil spirits and saves those who turn to Christ. This shows the great power of baptism, and how much we need it.” [Andreas (ca. 7th century), *Catena*]

It is not a removal of dirt from the body

It is not mere washing, it accomplishes far more.

but an appeal to God for a clear conscience,

To maintain the correct attitude and follow the covenant

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God,

The place of honor; also an allusion to Psalm 110:1

with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

He has regained His holy place above the angels. See [Hebrews 1:13](#) and [2:2](#).

Gospel - Mark 1:12-15

As Jesus started His public ministry, immediately after His baptism by John according to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, He was tempted by the devil. It is of this temptation and the very beginning of His public ministry that we hear about today.

¹² [T]he Spirit drove him out

Jesus is obedient to His Father.

into the desert,

The journey to the desert isn't for Jesus' benefit, but for ours. The desert is a place of isolation, a place of introspection and meditation, a place to get closer to God. The Israelites spent forty years in the desert getting to know God better before entering into the promised land. Although no details are given, it is usually assumed that this is the Judean desert where John the Baptist had been active.

“Soon after He had been baptized He performed a fast of forty days by Himself, and He taught and informed us by His example that, after we have received forgiveness of sins in baptism, we should devote ourselves to vigils, feasts, prayers and other spiritually fruitful things, lest when we are sluggish and less vigilant the unclean spirit expelled from our heart by baptism may return, and finding us fruitless in spiritual riches, weigh us down again with a sevenfold pestilence, and our last state would then be worse than the first.” (Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 720), *Homilies on the Gospels*, 1,12).

¹³ and he remained in the desert for forty days,

Forty is the number which indicates change. Moses spent 40 days on the mountain, Noah

encountered 40 days of rain, Israel spent 40 years in the desert.

tempted by Satan.

The name Satan means “adversary, tempter, accuser.” Before he was cast from heaven his name was Lucifer which means “light bearer;” now his name has been changed and he is the prince of darkness. The believer is constantly exposed to attacks (temptations) by Satan. The exact temptations of Jesus are not recounted in this gospel.

He was among wild beasts,

These may symbolize the beginning of the Messianic age as paradise regained (Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:25; Hosea 2:18); or it may symbolize the evil with which Jesus contends (Psalm 22:13-22; Isaiah 13:1-22; Ezekiel 34:5, 8, 25).

and the angels ministered to him.

The angels are God’s army, fighting on God’s side against the evil spirits.

14 After John had been arrested,

A foreshadowing of Jesus’ fate

Jesus came to Galilee

The Galilean ministry is central to Mark’s gospel. It is not only the scene of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, it is also where the Apostles go to meet the Risen Lord (Mark 16:7).

proclaiming the gospel of God:

The term “gospel” is most likely an editorial addition which applies a Christian term to God’s message.

15 “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

This is the same as John the Baptist’s message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). The key is repentance. The time of fulfillment, the “age to come” in Jewish theology has arrived – the Messiah has arrived and sins can be forgiven and mankind reconciled with God.