

1st Sunday of Lent, February 21st 2021, Year B

O Lord, may my heart be “upright and undivided” for I long to “walk with You” like Noah and Enoch.

Genesis 9:8-15

8God said to Noah and to his sons with him: Noah is ten generations after Adam and from all those people, only 8 survived.

9“See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you Note that the initiative for this covenant is God’s. This is the first covenant that is explicitly mentioned although the Catechism (CCC288) makes it clear that creation is revealed as the first step toward this covenant. This covenant relationship is one that God sought from the very beginning. (A covenant is a sacred relationship that creates a permanent bond between two parties. In the Bible it is compared both to a marriage and to the relationship between a father and his son, both, of course, have to do with family.) The whole of salvation history is really the story of how the covenant is broken and finally re-established in the New Covenant in Christ. This covenant after the flood requires nothing on man’s part. It is extended to all humankind and all creation (which is purified and renewed by the flood) and its sign is the rainbow. In Israel, “covenant” is very important so its origins were carefully preserved. This reading uses the word “covenant” 5 times! Later there will be the covenant with Abraham, which will affect only himself and his descendants and finally, under Moses, God will establish the covenant of Sinai, which is also confined to the people of Israel. But because man proved unable to keep these successive covenants, God promised, through the prophets, to establish a new covenant in the messianic age. This promise found its fulfillment in Christ when he himself said when he instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood: “This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood.”

10and 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.

11I 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.”

12God added: “This is a sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: This everlasting covenant that God made with Noah and with all living beings will remain in force as long as the world lasts.

13I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

14When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds,

15I 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.”

This reading is God’s pleased response to Genesis 8:20 where, after the flood, “Noah built an altar to the Lord and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar.” God says that when the rainbow appears in the clouds, HE will recall the covenant. Even though we will break the covenant, GOD WILL NOT. The covenant of baptism is a similar pledge of God’s faithfulness. Through the waters of the baptismal font, God takes away sin, preserves us from destruction and makes us heirs of the promise of salvation. We have discussed “typology” before, where the deeds, words and symbols of the old testament are revealed in Christ. One of these is the flood and Noah’s ark, which prefigured salvation by Baptism.

1 Peter 3:18-22

This is an adaptation of an early Christian hymn.

Beloved,

18Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the Spirit. Our Lord's sacrifice is unrepeatable and superabundantly sufficient to obtain the remission of all sins. Jesus Christ, the sinless one, suffered and died for the sinful ones. His death gave us new access to God by taking away sin. He removed the barrier between God and man. He was put to death in the flesh, which means his physical, earthly condition in which he resembles all other men, and this is in contrast to his risen state.

19In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison, In the Apostle's Creed we say that Jesus "descended into hell" which has the same meaning as these words in 1 Peter: "he also went to preach to the spirits in prison." This refers to those who died before the death of Christ and were deprived of the vision of God. These holy souls, who awaited their Savior in "Abraham's bosom," were delivered by Jesus Christ when he died and descended into hell. Jesus did not do this to deliver the damned nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to open the gates of heaven for the just who had gone before him.

20who had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water. "God patiently waited" refers to the time between when God resolved to wipe out all life on earth (except for Noah and his family) and the time that he actually did it. Noah, who was a preacher of uprightness, announced God's resolve during the time spent building the ark. This connection between the flood of Noah and Baptism was represented in the ancient places of baptism called baptisteries. These were often built with eight sides to indicate the number of the members of Noah's family, "eight in all" who escaped in the ark through the water.

21This prefigured baptism, which saves you now. It is not a removal of dirt from the body but an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, The season of Lent has always been observed as a preparation for Baptism (administered at the Easter Vigil) and so on the First Sunday of Lent it is appropriate that the Church should give us these first two readings to announce that theme. Those of us who have already been baptized will renew our baptismal promises at Easter. Every covenant is sealed by a covenant oath and this BAPTISMAL PLEDGE is the OATH of the New Covenant in Christ. Lent is the time the Church invites us to reflect on our solemn pledge and to prepare ourselves for its renewal in the baptismal rites of Easter. This baptism is not just the removal of dirt, a physical washing, for it signifies much more. The terminology here is that used in contracts and it means a pledge or agreement or consent to the essential stipulations. It basically means that the baptized person professes a faith in God and asks for perseverance in the good way of life he has entered in Baptism. Conscience is man's most secret core for he has in his heart a law inscribed by God to enable him to choose good and to avoid evil. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. We refer to this as a "clear conscience." The education of the conscience is a lifelong task that includes some basic principles: 1)One may never do evil so that good may result from it. 2)Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them (the Golden Rule). 3)Never do anything that makes your brother stumble. We must study and put into practice the Word of God (Scripture), for it is the light for our path. The more we choose what is right, the more we WANT to choose what is right.

²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him. The imagery of Christ being in heaven at “God’s right hand” means that our Lord, who is equal to the Father in his divinity, also, as man, occupies at his side the place of honor over all other created beings. This universal lordship of Christ is further emphasized by having all heavenly beings subject to him. Three degrees of angels are mentioned but it means all the angels because the number three symbolizes totality.

Mark 1:12-15

The first Sunday of Lent always presents us with the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert which takes place immediately after Jesus’ baptism. It is the preparation for his public ministry. All three readings today allude to baptism and its implications for the way we live, offering us a solid springboard into Lent. It is a time of new beginnings. In the ancient Church, the First Sunday of Lent began with an enrollment of those who were to be baptized at Easter. Following is the account of a young Christian woman named Etheria who recalls her own experience:

“Whoever wishes to give in his name does so on the eve of Lent; and a priest notes down all the names. The next day, the opening of Lent, in the middle of the church, a seat is placed for the bishop, and one by one the candidates are led up to him. If they are men, they come with their godfathers, if women, with their godmothers. Then the bishop questions the neighbors of each person who comes in saying: “Does he lead a good life? Does he respect his parents? Is he given to drunkenness or lying?” If the candidate is announced beyond reproach by all those who are thus questioned in the presence of witnesses, with his own hand the bishop notes down the man’s name. But if the candidate is accused of failing in any point, the bishop tells him to go out, saying, ‘Let him amend his life and when he has amended it, let him come to Baptism.’”

Mark’s account is extremely brief, omitting even the specifics of Satan’s three tempting offers. Nevertheless, this short passage evokes parallels with many figures and events in the Hebrew Scriptures.

¹²The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert,

¹³and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. Jesus faces the same ordeal that Adam and Israel endured in the OT. He is tempted by Satan among the wild beasts as the first Adam was tempted amid the beasts in paradise. He is led into the wilderness by the Spirit and tested for forty days reminding us of how the Israelites marched in the desert for 40 years to be purified from the idolatry they practiced in Egypt. Moses fasted for 40 days before he received the Law. As Jesus says in verse 15, “This is the time of fulfillment” for he is the new Adam, the new Moses and the new Israel. (Forty is a number that symbolizes purification in the Scriptures.) In the end he succeeds where Adam and Israel failed for he resisted the devil and proved his love for the Father. As the Israelites ate manna that was heaven sent, so Jesus is fed by angels. We are also reminded of the prophet Elijah, who endured a forty-day fast and was fed by ravens. We too struggle against Satan in the battle for our souls. The temptation is not wrong in itself, only when we give in to it. St. Alphonsus Mary de Liguori commented on how the Lord sometimes permits souls which are dear to him to be tempted in order that they may better understand 1) their own weakness and 2) the necessity of grace to prevent them from falling. God permits us to be tempted, that we may be more detached from the things of earth, and conceive a more ardent desire to behold him in heaven. God also permits us to be tempted in order to increase our merits, for when the soul is disturbed by temptation and sees itself in danger of committing sin, it has recourse to the Lord and to his divine Mother and it renews its

determination to die rather than offend God; it humbles itself and takes refuge in the arms of Divine Mercy. By this means, as is proved by experience, it acquires more strength and is united more closely to God.

¹⁴After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God. The arrest of John was a pivotal event that turned the focus of Jesus' ministry from the south, where his work overlapped John's, to Galilee, the area north of Judea and Samaria, whose people are commonly referred to as "Israelites" as distinct from southern Jews who are called "Judeans." "The gospel of God" means the same as "the gospel of Jesus Christ" and implies the divinity of Jesus Christ.

¹⁵"This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." With the coming of Jesus, the time of fulfillment of God's plan is at hand, and because of Jesus, people may enter into God's kingdom through repentance, that is, reforming their lives which is what we are called to do during Lent. The Code of Canon Law states that, "All members of the Christian faithful in their own way are bound to do penance in virtue of divine law." Penance is described as including prayer, acts of piety and charity, and self denial by diligently performing one's duties and by fasting and abstinence. It really isn't an option. Penance is like spiritual weightlifting, it strengthens the will so that we can fight temptation and turn our lives around. The Church asks those who are between the ages of 21 and 60 to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday by eating only one full meal. Two smaller meals that together do not equal the full meal may also be eaten. She also asks that all who are over the age of 14 should abstain from the eating of meat on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of Lent. (We are also asked to abstain from meat on all Fridays of the year unless we choose to make some other sacrifice as a substitute.)

Some of the material for this commentary is taken from the "Workbook For Lectors and Gospel Readers:1991" by Graziano Marcheschi with Nancy Seitz Marcheschi, "The Navarre Bible: 'Pentateuch' and also: 'Catholic Epistles' and 'St. Mark,'" "The Catechism of the Catholic Church," The Commentary Notes of Tim Grey, "Workbook For Lectors and Gospel Readers: 2003" by Aelred R. Rosser, "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: 'Mark' and 'Matthew,' and "God's Word Today (August 1988)."

In loving memory of Peg Schnell, who compiled these commentaries.