

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Lent

February 17-18, 2018

Readings: Genesis 9:8-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

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Many years ago, I was at a luncheon with colleagues when the conversation turned to the coming Lenten season. One person said he liked the positive approach that he had heard at Mass, one involving spiritual practices. Another person exclaimed, "Oh no! I prefer the old way. I think I'll give up desserts."

Today's readings provide a different insight about Lent from the "Giving up" that we focused on when I was young. Although I didn't understand it then, the point of those practices was not suffering, but transformation. Conversion. About becoming more the person God calls us to be. Much the way an athlete or dancer forgoes some things in pursuit of his/her ultimate fulfillment.

Our opening prayer today sets the theme for Lent, "May we grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ, and pursue the effects by worthy conduct."

And the riches hidden in Christ are revealed in our readings. The passage from Genesis is all good news. "See! I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you. And with every living creature...all the birds, and all the various tame and wild animals...." God is promising to cherish and nurture, not just humans, but *all* of creation. Remember that Noah and company had just survived a great flood, sent as punishment for human sinfulness. But God's promise is not just a negative. Not just a promise not to do any more harm. Rather, it is an invitation to intimacy with God. To enter into a loving, intimate, continuing relationship with our God. God is inviting us into God's own life. Offering you and me a new opportunity to live in the harmony God intended.

St. Peter links that new opportunity given after the flood with the one given us in Baptism. He describes Baptism not so much as a cleansing, but as an appeal to God. An appeal, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, on behalf of us who are baptized, for a clear conscience.

A clear conscience. An intimate relationship with God. These require putting on the mind of Christ.

And that is what Lent is really all about. Transformation into the mind of Christ. Becoming more who God calls us to be. Who will we be by Easter?

Lent began as a retreat for those preparing for Baptism. Today, it continues as a retreat for those of us preparing to renew our baptismal promises at Easter. Lent provides a time to grow in our understanding of the riches hidden in Christ. To grow in our ability to put on the mind of Christ. To learn to love with the heart of Jesus.

We just celebrated Valentine's Day this past week. Can we think of the traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as ways to fall more deeply in love with the God who has first loved us?

In our busy lives, it can be hard to make time to pray. So, we need to pray as we can, not as we can't. Sometimes, just five minutes in the dark, focusing on a lit candle, can put us in touch with God's presence. Or ten minutes with a Scripture passage. As I cared for ailing family members, it was often prayer on the run, trying to remember that I was serving Christ in each of them.

If fasting from food makes us more aware of our own hunger, instead of making us more responsive to God's children who are going hungry, perhaps we need to reimagine the practice. Can you and I fast from complaining, and live in gratitude, for example? Fast from electronics to spend more time with loved ones? Or fast from criticism and generate kindness?

Almsgiving can mean sharing ourselves with those who need our presence. Or volunteering at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Or donating to refugee relief.

Responding to the covenant God offers, we might ask: How do we enter into God's love and joy for *all* of creation? With hearts overflowing with love...openness...compassion... for all of God's creation...for all God's people?

In the quiet of his forty days in the desert, the Spirit clarified for Jesus who he really was and prepared him for what God was calling him to be and to do. Maybe by stripping ourselves of some of the noise and distractions in our lives during these forty days, we can see more clearly who we really are in God's eyes. What we are called to be and do.

Who will we be by Easter?