

Year B, First Sunday in Lent

February 18, 2018

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

The common thread running through today's readings is "water." The Old Testament reading for this morning (which we did not read at this service) was end of the story of Noah and the flood, and tells of the covenant, or promise, God made to the eight members of Noah's family, *all of humanity*... the sole survivors of the global flood. Our Gospel reading from St. Mark begins with the story of Jesus' baptism which marks the beginning of His earthly ministry. And our reading from the first letter of Peter is the summation of the Noah story and relates it to Jesus' baptism, tying those two events -- the flood and baptism -- together.

In the Genesis story God, in a sense, purified the world through a devastating flood, removing all traces of evil from humanity, saving God's creation by leaving eight good and righteous people...Noah and his family. And in the same way, writes the author of 1st Peter, baptism is a saving act...a saving grace, which purifies *us*...not in any sort of physical way, but spiritually, by removing the dirt from our soul – bringing us into the household of God.

Now, whether you believe the global flood from Genesis actually happened or not...and I suspect I know where most of you stand on this issue...the story is a fascinating glimpse into how the ancient Hebrew people viewed their relationship with God. The Hebrew people were surrounded by nations and tribes that believed their god...or their many gods...used creation as a kind of divine playground, and humans were nothing more than pawns to be used in a great celestial game of chess. Not so for the Hebrew people who saw God as a Creator and a Sustainer – a God who truly loved his creation. And that was a radical departure from the gods

worshipped by other ancient peoples. Our God is a loving God who wants only the best for creation...only the best for the creatures He created in His own image. And He made a covenant with Noah, placing a rainbow in the sky, signifying God's everlasting love for us and for all creation. Never again would God use water as an instrument of divine destruction.

Water...purifying...cleansing...salvation... these ideas and themes run through scripture this morning. God's covenant with Noah holds true to this day and forever, and is borne out in God's revelation of Jesus as Christ at Jesus' baptism. So it is no surprise that the theme for the First Sunday in Lent is "water," for water removed evil from the earth, the Hebrew slaves were led by Moses through the waters of the Red Sea into freedom, to be the great people God intended; Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan marked the beginning of his earthly ministry, a long journey leading to the cross, ending on Easter with his resurrection from the dead.

In this First week of Lent we take our first steps in our forty-day journey with Jesus. Some of you might be energized, spiritually alive and excited about the journey and the Lenten challenge ahead – whatever it might be. Some of you might find that you're in the wilderness, unable to pray – having a crisis of faith. If you find yourself there, please know that you are not abandoned... please know that Jesus never leaves you... and please know that you are part of a loving community that prays with you, and for you, when you don't feel you can pray. And I'll pass on the advice my spiritual director gave me when I once told him of my struggles to pray – *pray anyway*. Even if the words won't come... even if your mind won't let you... pray anyway – say the Lord's prayer – we all know that one. My spiritual director reminded me that God honors our intent to pray, just as much as God honors our flowery, well-crafted prayers.

In this First week of Lent we take our first steps in our forty-day walk with Jesus following him to the cross...mourning with his mother and his followers on Good Friday...rejoicing with them on Easter morning as, together, we look into an empty tomb.

Our Lenten walk has just begun. Hopefully for each of us there will be challenges, changes and real spiritual growth as, like Jesus, we wrestle with that which spiritually holds us down and holds us back. But always hold fast to the promise God has given us – a promise to love us, a promise to bring us a grace-filled abundant life now, and the promise of life eternal.

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam