

First Sunday of Lent

February 18, 2018

Two images from nature dominate this First Sunday of Lent. In these images we find the key for living the next six weeks deeply and fruitfully, as God is hoping we will live them. The first image is that of the desert. After Jesus was baptized, but before he began his years of public ministry, St Mark tells us in today's Gospel that the Spirit "drove Jesus out into the desert," where he experienced temptation. Throughout the Bible, the desert is often referred to a place of testing, where we experience our weakness and dependence on God. Water and food are hard to come by there, and the temperatures and emptiness are oppressive to both the body and the mind. The desert is a place where our illusions of self-sufficiency and comfort fade away. When we are in the desert, either literally or figuratively, we quickly realize that we need God. In other words, the desert is the opposite of the Garden of Eden. It is the place of suffering and hardship that sin has led us to. Both original sin and also our own personal sins have interfered with God's plan for our lives and for our world; they have put us in need of salvation. The second image in today's Readings is the flood, the abundance of water that cleansed the world of sin at the time of Noah. That ancient flood of water foreshadowed Christian baptism, the flood of grace that purifies our souls from sin, bringing new spiritual life into the desert of our sin-damaged hearts. Sin and salvation: our sins, and Christ's loving sacrifice that leads to salvation. These are the most fundamental aspects of our Catholic faith, and these are the themes that should fill our hearts and minds throughout the season of Lent.

Besides the desert and the flood, there is another, third, image from nature in today's Readings: the rainbow. Noah probably didn't know the scientific explanation behind rainbows, but he did understand their spiritual meaning. All of creation has a physical nature that science explores and explains. But creation also has a spiritual meaning - it is a gift from our God, a gift full of messages, lessons, and inspiration. Science can explain the prismatic refraction of light in a rainbow, but it cannot explain the thrill of wonder that fills our hearts when we behold that same rainbow. A rainbow appears when sunlight and storm clouds come together, and God chose this as a symbol of his covenant, of his promise that salvation would conquer sin. That covenant and that promise still stand; we must put our hope in them. Jesus, as today's Second Reading reminds us so beautifully, has suffered, died, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven, conquering

sin and evil once and for all. The crucifix is our rainbow; the cross of Christ is our Ark. No storm can cancel out Christ's victory over evil; no clouds can reverse it; no flood can extinguish it. And so, while we suffer in the storms of hardship and sin that make our lives and world so painful and difficult, we still continue to follow Christ, because the light of his love shines brightly even in the midst of the storm. We have the privilege to renew our hope once again, to be freshly inspired by a glimpse of our rainbow. When we see a rainbow in the sky, the first thing we do is tell those around us, so they will see it too. This Lent, let's do the same with the rainbow that shines in our Christian hearts.

Lent is a time of spiritual awakening and growth. We should be spending our 40 days growing in our relationship with God. The church has given us 3 very good but not exclusive ways of doing this, through almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. I am going to talk more about prayer and fasting because they can be used as one so often. This year Pope Francis came out with a list for fasting, such as; fast from hurting words and say kind words, fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity, fast from grudges and be reconciled, to name a few. The last fast on the list is fast from words and be silent so you can listen. Fasting from noise and words to pray. During the Mass there are times of what is called Sacred Silence. Starting today after the homily and after communion we are going to spend 2 – 3 minutes in silence. This is not a time to wonder where we are going to go eat after Mass or worry about what we have to do for work, or school, or at home. This is time to spend acknowledging the movement of our heart after receiving his words from scripture into our heart and, after communion, receiving his body into ours. To spend time relating to Jesus, to foster our relationship. To receive from Jesus the plan he has for our life, what his will is in our lives. And to respond with gratitude and to figure out if and how this will change our behavior. This is not easy and sometimes our mind will wander, but with time and practice this could become our favorite time of the day. By the time lent ends, we will all be pleasantly surprised at how much better our relationship with God is.