

Feb. 21, 2021 1st Sunday of Lent

Welcome to the First Sunday of Lent.

Lent means spring, a time of new awakenings, when the rest of the earth, and the desolation of the season of winter begins to produce new life in ways we have never imagined before. This Lent we are mindful and prayerful of the Spirit stirring within us, not only the hope of healing of so many people through the vaccines, but also a new awareness of, and clarity of, our callings in life together. We begin in the name of God, Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray.

O God, through your abundant mercy pour out upon us, like the rains we desire in this season, the fullness of your love.

Lead us through the wisdom of Christ's journey into the depths of our own heart, and the freedom to serve you in all others with whom we work, and pray, and play. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

The first lesson is from **Genesis, chapter 9**. [ Genesis 9: 8-17] It's about the conclusion of the Flood, and what God learned.

*God spoke to Noah and his sons saying,*

*'I am now establishing my Covenant with you and with your descendants to come, and with every living creature that was with you, the birds, cattle, and every wild animal with you, everything that came out of the ark, every living thing on earth. And I shall maintain my Covenant with you that never again shall all living things be destroyed by the waters of flood, nor shall there ever again be a flood to devastate the earth. And this,' God said, 'this is the sign of the Covenant which I now make between myself and you and every living creature for all ages to come. I now set my bow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth. When I gather the clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I shall recall the Covenant between myself and you and all living creatures. And never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all living things. When the bow is in the clouds, I shall see it, and call to mind the eternal Covenant between myself and you and all living beings. That,' God told them, 'is the sign of the Covenant I have established between myself and all living things on earth.'*

**Psalm 25** makes us grateful for the lives we have received.

[Gary Sponholtz plays and sings: *To You, O Lord, I Lift My Soul* (Psalm 25)  
by Leon Roberts and the Gospel proclamation: *The Time Has Come*]

The Gospel for today is from **Mark, chapter 1**. [Mark 1: 10-

*When Jesus came up from the waters of baptism, he saw the heavens open, and the Spirit descend upon him like a dove. And a voice came saying, 'You are my Son, my Beloved; my favor rests on you.' And, at once, the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert, and he remained there for 40 days, and was put to the test by the devil. He was with the wild animals and the angels, and they looked after him.*

*After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, and there he proclaimed the Gospel, saying, 'The time is fulfilled. The reign of God is close at hand. Turn back and trust the revelation.'*

The word of God. Thanks be to God.

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In the name of God, Abba Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

After the Flood wiping out all life, God regretted and said, 'Never Again', and made this sign as a pledge of the Covenant, a reminder that God never again would destroy life. And God put the rainbow into the sky, which to this day every time we see a rainbow, we are stunned. And people who are total strangers will ask each other, 'Do you see that? Do you see that?'

A rabbi friend told me that we should also be happy, and the Jewish community takes great assurance in the fact, that the bow of the rainbow is pointed away from us towards God. We are no longer the target.

But not human beings--oh no--we still believe in power and violence.

In history class, The Western World, what I received and, I think, most of you, was the teaching of a high regard for Rome: that ancient efficiency, their Law and Order, their Pax Romana, one of the epitomes of human history. Their insatiable appetite, though, for glory and wealth led them to constantly be conquering weaker nations. Tacitus, a Roman

historian, said, "A conquered British king once said, 'Rome creates a desert, and then they call it Peace.' "

Rome held it all together with the devil's three temptations, as classically shared among us. Bread and circuses keep the people entertained, and they'll forget, they'll be distracted, about what really happened. Secondly, Rome was constantly outsmarting and crushing its enemies inside the society and outside their borders. And the third thing to hold Rome together, was the constant stirring up of patriotism in a cult of fervor for the emperor, '*who you know is a divine genius*'.

Baptism and temptation go together. Jesus faced temptations for a lifetime, just like us. We, traditionally, at the very beginning of Lent, think of these temptations as simply personal challenges.?? One, life is more than food. Without an inner life, feeding on God's word, we die long before we get to the grave. Secondly, the Devil tempts Jesus: 'If you just jump off a pinnacle of the temple, you will impress people, and that's what really matters.' And third, the Devil says, 'If you honor me, if you sell your soul, why, you can have the good life without suffering.' Jesus refuses all of these because there is no integrity apart from the life being lived in God's wisdom.

But the Temptations, friends, are not merely personal, they are public too. Here's another version of what the Temptations are. First, dazzle people with magic--call it Technology, or Wall Street, and you will never be hungry again. Or the priestly power of the Temple--I know many folks aren't religious these days--but that priestly power is just too good, huh, to be true. Lynchings were rituals of human sacrifice that were performed by high priests. Why do you think they're wearing those outfits? Do you know that back in the day, the children were let out of school to go witness lynchings? And the key to their success was that lynchings were nearly always done at the hands of 'Persons Unknown'. They happened in a collective way so that no one could be blamed. Thousands of people could gather, but all were hiding and disguising themselves in the crowd, so that no one, no one person was responsible. The third public temptation is that of just raw political power. '*All of this will be yours if you fall down and worship me.*'

Following the impeachment conclusion, Mitch McConnell recently gave a scathing rebuke of nobody. '*Somebody should do something about that former president! But not me.*'

My point, friends, is not merely a political one. That's not what matters to me in this story. What's frightening is that what Mitch said is often the excuse used by all of us:

*'Somebody else do something.'*

Jesus is in, but not of, this world. He is among us to transform our hearts and relationships. He's here to reveal that God, who is Life, is attracted to those who have the least life. Though invisible, or victims, or targets, or marginalized, Jesus eats with these outsiders, and makes clear that grace and the intimacy with God is theirs as well. This is scandalous. It is outrageous. Jesus was attacked. He lives under death threats constantly. He finally dies in utter failure. Yet, he makes clear that love never divides. Love always unites, it brings together. It brings us closer to ourselves, to each other, and especially, closer to the vulnerable and the disreputable. And that's how you tell the difference between temptations of selfishness, greed, and power, the difference between those, and compassion. [Are] our life and our relationships enriched, or denied? Are we separated and divided, or brought together? Merciful love discovers that moving towards our neighbors in need is always moving towards God as well.

Here is the irony. Rome and the Devil respect nothing but power, conquest, triumph, corruption. But they are undone by a weapon they don't understand, by a means that contradicts all of their assumptions, beliefs, and values. And that is radical weakness, or yielding, that exposes and defeats power. Christ Crucified unmasks power and defeats death. Christ's love and wisdom reveal our violence, our rejection of each other, our indifference, and heals us of the need to create violence, and forgives us with a mercy we can't even comprehend.

So no need to flood the world this week, my friends. Just become a colorful beam in God's rainbow. Amen.

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We have many people to remember in our prayers this week.

Don, Karen, Drew and Dennis, and Seth,  
Ed Klitsch, Dana, Marshall, Doug,  
Vince, John Dahlin, Michele, Bob Worthington,  
Brian, Stanley, Kyle, Marlene, George, Maili,  
Bob Mantei, Dabbie and Steve's family, Lenny, Grant,  
Heather, David Vaala's family, and Kelsey.

O God, in your great and abiding mercy, comfort all these friends with your wisdom, and grace, and healing spirit, that they might be assured deep within their being of your presence and love and care. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace.