

1st Sunday of Lent - B
Genesis 9:8-15;
I Peter 3:18-22;
Mark 1:12-15
Little Flower - 2/22/15

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the First Sunday of Lent. Today's readings introduce several Lenten themes.

As most of you probably know, our Sunday readings follow a three-year cycle. This year we are in Cycle B. During Lent, in Cycle B, the Old Testament readings focus on the theme of covenant. This is why we will place our *bona opera* in our Ark of the Covenant. They will be burned in the new fire at the Easter Vigil.

A biblical covenant is a relationship of love between God and his people. Biblical covenants all have their origin in God. God initiates the relationship or covenant with his people. In today's reading from Genesis, the covenant is unilateral and unconditional. In other words, God enters into a relationship of love with Noah and his descendants without requiring anything from them. All of us are familiar with the story of Noah and the ark. Because of the sinfulness of the people, God destroyed all living creatures with a flood with the exception of Noah and his family and the pairs of animals on the ark. Afterwards God promised never again to destroy all bodily creatures from the earth by a flood, and he gave the rainbow as a sign of his promise.

In today's reading from Peter, we are told that the flood, in which only eight persons were saved through water, prefigured the waters of baptism which save us now. During Lent, our RCIA catechumens, candidates, and *confirmandi* enter into a time of intense preparation to receive the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Sunday. At today's 8:30 a.m. Mass, we celebrated the Rite of Sending: today we sent them to the Cathedral to the Archbishop for the Rite of Election. During Lent, the Church asks us to walk with them on their journey as they prepare to receive the sacraments of initiation and we prepare to renew our baptismal promises on Easter.

At the same time, today's Gospel tells us that prior to his public ministry Jesus spent forty days in the desert where he was tempted by Satan. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not tell us anything about those temptations. Lent is our forty days in the desert during which we strive through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to put out of our lives all that is selfish and sinful and to become stronger in resisting temptation.

Scripture scholars tell us that Jesus' words in today's Gospel form the core of his teaching: "*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.*" In this passage, Jesus issues a two-fold challenge to his listeners and to us: repent and believe in the gospel. The Greek word for *repent* challenges us to turn around our lives, i.e., to turn away from selfishness and sin and to turn toward God and others in love. It calls us to give a new direction to our lives. However, the Greek word for *repent* also challenges us to see God, others, and ourselves in new ways.

Finally, my brothers and sisters, Jesus' second challenge is to believe in the Gospel. This is why I like our Lenten remembrance this year. This year our Lenten remembrance is a fish. A fish was an ancient Christian symbol for Christ. The Greek word for fish was ΙΧΘΥΣ (Ichthus), an acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." This is the Gospel or Good News of Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is our Savior.