

1st Sunday of Lent - B
Genesis 9:8-15;
I Peter 3:18-22;
Mark 1:12-15
Little Flower - 2/18/25

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the First Sunday of Lent. Each of today's readings reflects a key Christian theme.

A biblical covenant is a relationship of love between God and his people. In the reading from Genesis, God established a covenant with Noah and his sons and their descendants that he would never again destroy all bodily creatures by the waters of a flood. He gave the rainbow as the sign of this covenant. Throughout the Old Testament, God continually reached out to humankind to establish a relationship with us. However, it was Christ's death on the cross that fulfilled all of God's promises and sealed the new and eternal covenant between God and us. At each Eucharist, we commemorate and renew this Covenant in the words of Institution: "For this is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

The second reading offers the biblical basis for the most confusing statement in the Apostles' Creed: "he descended into hell." The hell referred to in the Apostles' Creed is not hell as we understand it, i.e., a place of punishment, but the abode of the dead before Jesus' death on the cross. This passage explains how those who lived before Christ were themselves saved by Christ's death on the cross. This passage also emphasizes the importance of Christian baptism. Jesus lived in an arid land where water meant the difference between life and death. In effect, Jesus was making the point that the waters of baptism are as important to eternal life as physical water is to physical life.

Every year on the First Sunday of Lent, the Gospel tells the story of Jesus' temptations in the desert. Mark's Gospel, however, is different from Matthew's or Luke's Gospel. Mark does not describe the temptations. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote: "*For the high priest we have is not incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us, but has been put to the test in exactly the same way as ourselves, apart from sin*" [4:15; JB]. In other words, Jesus was tempted in every way that we are. He struggled with everything with which we struggle.

From where do our temptations come? In the desert, Jesus was tempted by the devil. Some of our temptations also come directly from the devil. Unlike Jesus, our temptations come, first of all, from within ourselves. We are easily deceived and easily deceive ourselves about good and evil, right and wrong. Second, we are weak. Lenten prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are designed to help us see in new ways and to help us develop greater self-control.

However, temptations also come from outside ourselves. Other people are often a source of temptation. Sometimes people encourage us to do what we know is wrong. For example, adolescents often encourage one another to drink, try drugs, or steal. Other times we do wrong without any encouragement because of who are friends are. For example, it is very easy to gossip and criticize if we hang around people who gossip and criticize. If we spend time with people who drink excessively, we are more likely to drink excessively. Other people's influence on us can be very subtle. For example, if I really like someone whose values and lifestyle are contrary to my own, this can call my own values and lifestyle into question.

Today, however, temptations also come from social media which often glorifies false values and offers a distorted vision of reality. Social media is now the largest source of pornography. It is also one of the biggest causes of division in our country and church.

My brothers and sisters, today's Gospel concludes with Jesus' core message: "*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.*" Lent calls us to respond to the coming of God's kingdom in Christ through repentance, which is a change of direction in life rooted in a new way of seeing, and belief in the person of Jesus Christ.