

First Sunday in Lent – Cycle B

This is the first Sunday of Lent – our Church’s primary penitential time of the year. The church came upon this liturgical season based on the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert fasting and prayer. We have to spend time examining our conscience because we are human and our conscience needs a little house cleaning now and then. There is a lot of growth potential if we use the 40 days of Lent taking advantage of opportunities for fasting and praying.

In the first reading today, we hear that God has done some serious house cleaning of his own. The Genesis story tells us that most people are destroyed because of their unrighteousness. The story also demonstrates the mercy of God who makes a promise to his people that he will never perform such a mass destruction ever again. God makes this promise even though future generations make no promise to ever change their behaviors. But that is the mercy that God has for us – that is what Lent is all about. We can experience the mercy of God by just clearing our conscience. God forgives the evil and promises new life. In Lent, we can anticipate the new covenant which God will fulfill at the end of Lent when we remember the passion of Christ who dies for our sins.

We can celebrate God’s Promise to us – eternal life
But what is Our Response – we can choose life or not.

Lent can help us examine God’s promise and our response to his promise. Lent is a time to set aside our ‘fancy clothes’ and put on something more like a sackcloth. A sackcloth would be the clothing of the poor. We need to get back to basics so that we can examine our conscience. Just like Ash Wednesday where the ashes remind us the temporary nature of this life. We are trying very hard during this season to be sure we are in touch with what we are really made for. We need to be in touch with what really makes us happy. God has given us what we need to be happy. As I have said before; things are just not right when we are not in touch with God. Our response to God’s gifts makes all the difference. Lent is a good time to get in touch with God.

We may think we know what makes us happy. Satan will try to convince us that he has what it takes to be happy. The gospel writer in Mark is very brief in his description of the temptation of Jesus. In Mark, we only hear that Jesus is in the desert for 40 days and is tempted by Satan. We get more details regarding the temptations from Matthew and Luke. I think it is important to summarize these temptations because it gives us some insight into how Satan thinks and how he will convince us that he has the answer for our happiness. The temptations of Jesus as told in Matthew are:

1. Hey, if you are hungry turn the stones into bread,
2. Put yourself in harms way because God will not allow you to fail, and
3. I will give you all of these kingdoms if you just worship me.

In other words, the three temptations are 1.) make yourself comfortable, 2.) make yourself successful, and 3.) make yourself powerful. These certainly sound familiar to me. You just make yourself comfortable, successful, and powerful and you will always

be happy. Right? There is nothing wrong with being comfortable, successful, or powerful. That is how the world works. However, if you want to be happy, make yourself comfortable, but you Must be connected to the creator who made you for a deeper purpose. To be happy, you must be deeply satisfied, deeply at peace, deeply connected with the things that really bring us the kind of fulfillment we are destined for. We feel good because it so naturally right.

The thing about these temptations that have been so successful for Satan is that we are suckers. I know I have been lured into get rich schemes. I buy a lottery ticket now and then. But temptations can be much worse. We can justify infidelity in marriage, dishonesty in finances, telling lies in conversations, or acting irresponsible. You know – you could justify falsifying insurance forms on the basis that the medical procedure is really necessary. You could justify misinformation on tax forms on the basis that you deserve a piece of the pie that everyone else is getting. You could justify lying to your employer about paid sick time on the basis of unfair working conditions.

No matter what, God's Promise is the same – eternal life
Do we respond with a clear conscience? – are we choosing life?

When Noah and his family came out of the ark after the great flood, God gave them a symbol of saving them through water. The rainbow is a symbol of a weapon – the bow and the arrow. The bow is facing up, away from earth. There is no more punishment, there is no more violence being directed toward the earth. This story was also a sign of encouragement to the Israelites who were discouraged in their own storm. They were living in exile and quite discouraged. They were losing confidence in their leadership and even losing confidence in their God. But remember, they may have felt abandoned by God but God doesn't move from us. If we are distant from God, who do you think is moving away, God or us? Well, I think that God stands firm always prepared to help us. If you feel some distance, I am saying that it is you that is moving away from God.

We have our own storm right now. Many people here in this church are feeling the pains of economic crisis. People are tossed about in these economic storm waters as jobs are lost, hours are cut, benefits are cut, housing has become a real concern, and food can be reduced. Just like the Israelites, we can look at the Noah story for encouragement. The moral of the story is that if you remain faithful to God, He will pull you through just like Noah's family was pulled through.

God made a promise to us – eternal life
What is Our response – we have to choose life

If God throws you a life line in the stormy seas, you take the life line. You pray to God to figure out your next move. Don't listen to Satan, don't cheat, lie, and deceive. That is not choosing life.

In our readings today, we are getting a lot of encouragement. The story of Noah reminds us that God will save the righteous. In Mark, we hear that Jesus made it 40 days in the

desert while being tempted by Satan. Also, in the second reading from first Peter the letter was written to encourage first century Christians who were suffering because of their faith. The first three centuries were very dangerous for those that expressed their belief in Jesus. A large part of their persecution came from fellow Gentiles who you might say were jealous of the new converts new found life. Peter had to convince the new Christians to continue to live their counter-culture life in spite of their harassment. The new Christians were under tremendous pressure to conform to the standard social norms of the times which were contrary to gospel teachings. Peter urged the new Christians to stay true to their faith; Love of God and Love of Neighbor.

Things haven't changed much. Because social pressures continue to tempt Christians towards a less-than-absolute faithfulness, we can stand to hear this message too. Peter's message was basically that Jesus suffered at the hands of the unrighteous. His death was not the end of his life or his ministry; on the contrary Jesus rose victorious from death and went on to preach. We have a choice.

God made a promise to us – eternal life
What is Our response – we have to choose life

In the gospel reading from Mark we are given a formula for dealing with temptation:

1. The Spirit drove Christ into the desert. He didn't go alone – he was accompanied by the Spirit. Whether Jesus went to the desert to be tested or he went there to pray later in his ministry – in every instance, the Spirit would be with Jesus to inspire and to guide him. You have the same Spirit.
2. By referencing the 40 days of testing, we learn in scripture that the number 40 refers to the presence and protection of God. The 40-day flood, Israel's 40 years in the desert, Elijah's foray into the desert. So too with Jesus, he was never without the presence and protection of God while being tempted. We have the same God to be with us and protect us when we feel tempted.
3. Jesus fasted and was tempted by Satan among wild beasts while angels ministered to him. This is the world we live in: we are in a wild kind of place, but with a supernatural help.

God's promise of eternal life was fulfilled through the cross
We have to make a response to God's promise – choose life