

## **FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT-FEBRUARY 21, 2021**

**READINGS: Genesis 9:8-15;  
Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 25;  
1 Peter 3:18-22;  
Gospel of Mark 1:12-15**

### **Lent: A Time for new beginnings**

There is an interesting commercial about COVID-19 on one of our radio stations. The commercial talks about the effects of the pandemic on our lives: how the pandemic has changed our lives, has disturbed our plans to go away for vacation, has affected our jobs and our daily activities. The commercial continues by saying that we are all waiting for the time when the bell will sound to announce the end of the pandemic. The commercial then ends with a message that the end of the pandemic will usher us into a new beginning and a new life.

On this first Sunday of Lent, the three readings invite us to reflect on the spiritual significance of a new beginning in the lives of God's people. We begin with the first reading from the Book of Genesis. Today's passage is about Noah and the Great Flood. Evil had been increasing since Adam and Eve's disobedience to God and Cain's murder of his younger brother Abel. God was not happy with the way things were going. However, God was pleased with Noah. Therefore, God directed Noah to build an ark as a shelter for his family-- his wife, their three sons and their wives together with a group of pairs of other creatures. God then caused a great flood to destroy all his creatures on earth including human beings. During the flood, Noah, his family and the other creatures took shelter in the ark.

We join the story in today's passage after the flood when Noah, his family and the animals were all back on dry land. Today's passage begins with, "God said to Noah

and to his sons with him, As for me I am establishing my covenant with you". Biblical scholars describe a covenant as "the central metaphor through which we probe the mystery of our relationship with God". A covenant is more than a contract. Whereas a contract between two parties can be dissolved, a covenant cannot be dissolved. A covenant between God and his people would remain in place even if human beings were to become unfaithful to the covenant, because God is always faithful. The covenant God made with Noah was symbolized by the rainbow in the sky. The covenant assured that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh". The covenant of the rainbow was the new beginning involving all creatures. The covenant assured humanity's future.

The story about the flood in the first reading forms the backdrop to the second reading from the First Letter of Peter. Before today's passage the writer had exhorted the early Christians that it was better to suffer for doing good rather than to do evil. In his exhortation the writer reminded the early Christians to follow in the footsteps of Christ who also suffered for doing good.

The writer began today's passage with, "Beloved, Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God". In his teaching about the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the writer then compared the flood in Noah's time to the ritual of baptism of Christians. Just as the waters of the flood saved Noah and his family from death, so do the waters of baptism in Jesus save Christians from spiritual death. Through the death and the resurrection of Jesus, God has given us a new beginning. When we are baptized into the death of

Christ we emerge from the water into his risen life. Through the waters of baptism God has established a new covenant and offers us a new beginning.

The theme of a new beginning in the second reading leads us to the Gospel passage from Mark. Today's passage, immediately after the baptism of Jesus begins with "After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness". Today's passage is the narrative of the temptation of Jesus by the Evangelist Mark. The word "wilderness" in the Bible signifies a place of trials, challenges and a place of preparation. The expression "forty days" frequently occurs in Scriptures. It means a considerable period of time. For example, Moses spent forty days and nights on the mountain when he received the Ten Commandments from God (Exodus 34:28).

Although Mark's narrative about the temptation of Jesus is brief, the Evangelist's style of writing was to focus on the identity of Jesus. At the beginning of his Gospel, the Evangelist described Jesus as the "Son of God". In today's passage, Mark used the temptation story to focus on the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the good news of God. Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news". The word, "repent" means to change one's ways so as to live in right relationship with God.

On every first Sunday of Lent we are accustomed to reading the temptation of Jesus from one of the Synoptic Gospels-- either Matthew or Mark or Luke. In today's narrative from Mark, Jesus calls us to respond to his proclamation of the Good News. Jesus calls us to change our ways and for faith in the Good News.

What do the three readings teach us as part of our Lenten journey? As Christians, when we do the readings in the context of Lent, we are reminded to be faithful to the

covenant that God has made with us in His Son Jesus Christ. God made a covenant with Noah and his people in the story about the Great Flood and in Jesus God has made a covenant with Christians. Lent therefore offers us a special time to reflect on the ways that we are responding to the covenant. Lent offers us the opportunity for a new beginning of spiritual life in Jesus. Lent can be a time when we yearn to begin all over again.

This year, the pandemic, with all the lockdowns, loss of jobs, and loss of lives, has caused many people to reflect on ‘what will come after’ the pandemic is over. The commercial that I shared with you earlier talked about the yearning for a new beginning and a new life after the pandemic. As Christians, we face trials, temptations and challenges and a constant battle against evil. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World), Pope Francis talks about this constant battle-- the battle against evil. He writes, “Along this journey, the cultivation of all that is good, progress in the spiritual life and growth in love are the best counterbalance to evil” (163).

Lent is that part of the Christian journey that the Church has given us to examine our progress in the spiritual life. This is the time when we open our hearts to the workings of the Holy Spirit to help us recognize those areas in our lives that need to be transformed. During this Lent, let us ask God to create within us a spirit of transformation. During this Lent let us be open to the new beginnings in our lives and in our community.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance.

