

# Homily for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

February 20-21, 2021

Readings: Genesis 9: 8-15; 1 Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 12-15

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Have you ever visited Niagara Falls? Did you spend time standing above the powerful incessant rush of the water, leaning over (well, not too far over) the rail and letting the thunderous currents fill you with the grandeur and brilliance of the God who created it? This God of frightening, potentially destructive power, this same God of refreshment, renewal and regrowth, rushes relentlessly onward in the torrent just below your feet. *Mysterium tremendum, mysterium fascinans*—a mystery at once terrifying and unspeakably beautiful.

Our readings for this First Sunday in Lent invite us to move beyond the imagery of grimy ashes and the grumbling of empty stomachs toward one of the most ambivalent symbols of our faith, the vector of our identity as Christians: Baptism, in water and in the Holy Spirit. Our First Reading, the story of Noah and the Ark, reflects both sides of the mystery: The Flood destroys almost everything, and yet, on the other side of the Flood comes the rebirth of the earth and God's promise not only of moral renewal but the cessation of the threat of further destruction.

The text from the First Letter of Peter makes clear to the members of the young Christian community that their moral core, their souls, have been saved in water, as a comparison to the way Noah and his family were saved. Except now the washing-away of the old and the fresh greening of the new have been accomplished in Baptism, an “appeal to God for a clear conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...”

Unfortunately the Roman Missal misses the boat, so to speak, by beginning the Gospel of Mark at 1:12, not 1:9 where Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River and the continuity of the theme is perfectly clear. The passage we will hear in today's liturgy begins with a sudden change of subject: “The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert...” Matthew and Luke say more gently, “The Spirit *led him...*” but Mark forces the point. The same Spirit that had just appeared as a divine revelation,

identifying this Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God, forcibly drives him into a dangerous wasteland, full of wild animals. It is as if he did not choose this. The Spirit that penetrated him in the Jordan now compels him into the desolation that will ground his ministry, not a desolation of cactus flowers and contemplative prayer, but of struggle and conflict.

It won't help us understand this conflict if we see it merely as Jesus vs. Satan, rather like a 1950s Godzilla-versus-whomever "creature feature" film. We need to go deeper to harvest the spiritual meaning. Over a prolonged period of earthly time ("forty days" resonates with the story of Noah and the Flood, but it could simply be shorthand for "a long time") cosmic powers engage in combat, far away from civilization and social order. The one-on-one struggle of the divine versus the demonic will thread its way through Mark's Gospel when Jesus returns to inhabited lands and engages again with his friends and the local populations, healing the sick and hushing the demons who "know him."

It would be logical to interpret the missing baptismal narrative and the emphasis on Jesus' temptation in the desert as a means of bringing forward a Lenten emphasis on individual Christians' struggle to resist evil and sin in our lives. And heaven knows, we are coping with new categories of temptation unimagined even last year at this time. The temptation to pull one's mask off one's nose to get more fresh air. The temptation to vilify a neighbor who's left a campaign banner for the other party on their lawn. The temptation for white people to travel to a part of the city with a high proportion of Black and brown people, to fall into line and get a Covid vaccine at a pop-up clinic.

Where is Baptism in all this? Briefly, in the cosmic dimension. Temptations do not merely lure the individual to morally corrupt actions, but distort and damage entire societies and cultures, to say nothing of the sustainability of the earth itself. Baptism is a sacrament of the earth itself, of the cosmos, of the renewal of all of creation. Baptism reminds us of the sacramentality of all God has made. And Baptism commissions us to take our personal responsibility, our rightful place, in the immensity of the cosmos.