

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT - B

February 18, 2018

First Reading – Genesis 9:8-15

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 25

Second Reading – 1 Peter 3:18-22

Gospel – Mark 1:12-15

My dear people of God:

Our Responsorial Psalm is a source of strength to us who struggle to keep our covenant with God. I wish to sing with the psalmist: *“Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant”*.

These verses/stanzas tell beautifully of the psalmist’s appreciation of Yahweh’s love. If Noah were alive before this psalm was composed, he would have used the same verses when his family and all animals went out of the ark after the great flood and saw the rainbow and vegetation.

The story of Noah and the Great Flood in our First Reading is one of those biblical narratives that we are so familiar with, that we think we know the whole story.

We tend to think of Noah’s story as a children’s story of animals and rainbows: a story about God’s love for animals, about remembering God’s love each time we see a rainbow, and about the bright side of every storm.

Or we might think of it as the story of God’s punishment to human rebellion. God flooded the earth, wiping out nearly everything in a fit of “divine rage”.

Neither of these stories is the whole story, of course. And neither contains much truth. The real story is that God has a myriad of ways of calling us back to the harmony that God intended for us. Our first reading for today, in which God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, tells us *that God is hanging up the bow, putting aside forever the option of destruction and seeking us as God’s own.* The entire flood narrative (Genesis 6:5-9:17) is the

culmination of a story of increasing human sinfulness that begins in Genesis 3. There we first see that sin results in disharmony: between humans and other creatures (3:15); between male and female (3:16); and between humans and their earthly labors (3:17-18).

Disharmony intensifies in chapter four, in which the first murder, that of a brother no less, occurs. The genealogy of chapter five draws the link from Adam's generation to Noah's in order to highlight the downward spiral of humanity.

Finally, chapter 6, verses 1 to 8 narrates the breaking of God's harmonious world. In the coupling of heavenly and earthly beings, the boundary between the two realms is shattered. The entire cosmos is thus thrown into disorder, and humanity is so broken that God regrets having created it in the first place.

The language of this divine regret in chapter 6, verses 5 to 6 is breathtaking. In verse five, God realized that "every inclination of the thoughts of human hearts was only evil continually."

Brothers and sisters, please know that God's response to this realization was not one of anger nor revenge. Rather, God was "sorry that He had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart" (verse 6). God laments over the corruption of the beings that God made with such care and love, and God's heart, in striking contrast to the evil inclination of the human heart, is grieved by their betrayal. God is pained by the brokenness of creation. So, He sends the flood, then, not as an act of revenge, but out of grief over the rending of right human relationship with God. We realize that human betrayal of God's intention has effects beyond human beings; it affects the whole world (6:11).

But the flood was not meant to wipe away Creation entirely. The flood was in fact the means of re-creation. God washes the earth clean and both *God and man and the earth* begin again. The re-creative nature of the flood was underscored by parallels between this narrative and the creation narrative of chapter 1 of Genesis.

That which God had repeatedly pronounced good in chapter one, God now names as evil (6:5 and 6:12).

The separation and gathering of the waters (1:6-11) is first undone (6:11) and then redone (8:3-14).

God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" (1:28) is repeated three times (8:17, 9:1, and 9:7) after the flood.

That humans are created in the image of God is repeated (9:6b). Thus all of creation is given a new beginning, a new opportunity to live in the harmony that God intended. However, this new beginning is also a continuation: God does not create new beings, but begins *anew with a remnant of the beings created at the beginning*.

The Divine Heart that was so aggrieved by human wickedness that caused God to send a flood is now moved by that same grief to seek another way to get through to us. So God promised to Noah and to his descendants, and to every creature on the earth, never again to destroy all creation with a flood.

The sign of this covenant, God's bow in the clouds, is precisely the bow of battle. Ancient depictions of a deity armed with bow and arrow were not unusual. To hang up one's bow is to retire from battle. That bow in the clouds is the sign of God's promise that whatever else God does to seek our restoration, destruction is off the table. He will give us a "Fresh Start".

This "covenant" is unconditional (9:9), universal (9:9-10, 17), and eternal (9:12, 16). The recurrence of "I," "Myself," and "My" demonstrates the unconditional nature of this covenant. God Himself will ensure that this covenant is carried out. It is not dependent upon man's work or faithfulness. This is how God typically works. There is nothing man can do to earn His favor.

The replication of the phrase "*every living creature*" (9:10a, 10b; 12b) and its equivalents, "*all flesh*" (9:11b; 15b; 17b), and "*every living creature of all flesh*" (9:15a; 16b) - a total of eight times, affirms God's passionate concern for, and certain commitment to, the preservation and care of all living species on the earth. God appreciates both animal and human life. So, should we.

God clearly states that this is an "eternal covenant" (9:16), "for all successive generations" (9:12). Since God is the eternal God who dwells outside of space and time, He can maintain His covenants as long as He sovereignly chooses.

A biblical covenant usually involved three things: parties, terms, and promises. When God makes a covenant with us, it normally involves these three elements. The difference is that God alone determines the terms of the agreement, and that God always comes through on His end of the deal.

In 9:12-17, God also attaches significance to the rainbow as a “sign” of His covenant. The Hebrew word for rainbow (qeset) is also the word for a battle bow. The point seems to be that the bow is now “put away,” hung in place by the clouds, suggesting that the “battle,” the storm, is over. Thus the rainbow speaks of peace. As a result, whenever clouds appear over the earth and a rainbow appears, God will “remember”. It is interesting to note the fact that the rainbow is not designed so much for man’s benefit but for God’s. Perhaps there is a play here on the verbs “see” and “remember.” The flood story began with God “seeing” (Gen 6:5, 12) the unrestrained evil in the world. It ends with God “seeing” the rainbow. The flood story reaches a turning point when God “remembers” Noah (8:1). It reaches a climactic point when He “remembers” His covenant.

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Peter wants to teach us that we are called to bear witness in a hostile world, but we can trust God to vindicate us.

Peter uses Christ as the main example, showing that His unjust suffering resulted in witness and that He was vindicated through His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. Noah was another example of a man who bore witness to a hostile world and was vindicated by God who delivered him and his family through the flood. Today as Peter’s readers, we should be willing to bear witness even if it means being submerged with trials (baptism), even if it meant persecution, knowing that God will vindicate them.

Since Christ bore witness through His suffering and was vindicated by His Father, we, too, can bear witness through suffering, but we need to trust God

who will surely vindicate us. The truth is that Christ suffered unjustly on our behalf; and was vindicated through His resurrection and ascension.

We may suffer for doing what is right as a means of bearing witness. Let us imitate Christ and bow before Him, who alone is exalted over all. Christ's suffering involved "*the just for the unjust*" or, "righteous for the unrighteous". Right away we see that only Christ is our example as the just or righteous who suffered for the unjust or unrighteous.

None of us, when we suffer, can truly say, "I don't deserve this!" We do say that because we erroneously compare ourselves with other sinners and think, "I'm a good person! I don't do drugs or cheat on my mate or murder. I'm basically honest and law-abiding. Why should I suffer when scoundrels get away with murder and enjoy a good life?" But our problem is, we're comparing ourselves with the wrong standard.

Peter implies that we bear witness through in two ways: through "baptism" (meaning: by being immersed in suffering) and through holy living (as seen in the example of Noah).

Peter's disciples and readers were suffering. They had borne witness to their faith in Christ through "baptism". Perhaps some had confessed Christ verbally and were being persecuted Christians. Peter is using the flood and deliverance of Noah and his family as a loose analogy or type of what is portrayed in Christian salvation and baptism. Peter's point is clear: His readers were a small minority seeking to obey God, but surrounded by a godless culture. They were being ridiculed for not joining in the dissipation around them. Peter uses the example of Noah to say, "*The majority is seldom right on spiritual matters! Stand alone for God, if you must. Don't cave in to the pressure to conform to this godless world. Like Noah, you will bear witness. Also like Noah, you will be delivered and this wicked world will perish.*"

If we bear witness through baptism and holy living, God will vindicate us. He vindicated Noah, although he was vastly outnumbered. He vindicated Christ, although it looked to His enemies as if He was defeated on the cross.

Now, let us go to the gospel. Today we celebrate the First Sunday of Lent. St. Mark states very briefly that Jesus was "tempted by Satan." Unlike us, He withstood temptation. In doing so, He shows us that it is possible, *with God's grace*, to resist Satan, to put God first, to recognize that only He can make us happy, only He can give us peace. The things of God's creation are good. We

should receive them with gratitude,. If we have made a created thing into a god, Jesus has a word for us, God is calling us: "Repent." "This is the time of fulfillment." "The kingdom of God is at hand" "Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Jesus is not speaking about some vague repentance. He has a specific plan. The first step is to pray. He gave us an example by spending forty days in prayer. You might say, "How can I get time to pray?" That's where the second step comes in: fasting. Not just eating more simply; but fasting from other things: video games, television, the Internet and cell phone. Instead of e-mail, why not try *knee-mail*? Knee-mail is getting down on your knees and praying for the person you are concerned about.

Wild beasts represent the fragility of our lives. We have bodies like the other animals and at any moment we could come to a violent end - an earthquake, a fire or some catastrophe, like the flood in the first reading. Or it could be something more common: a car crash or a vessel bursting in the brain...we could even be attacked by a wild animal, including the human kind.

Not only do wild beasts represent the dangers that surround us, but also dangers within. We humans sometimes act like animals. We have popular stories about humans turning into animals, such as Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year old shooter who killed 17 students and teachers of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

All of us can acknowledge that we have an animal side, but that is not all we are. In today's Gospel we see a supernatural realm: the ministry of angels.

If Jesus - in His humanity – needed the ministry of angels, how much more do you and I need it? The ministry of angels helps us have a new mind. You see, we are connected not just to the animal world, but to a realm of superior being God Himself and His angels. If we only focus on our animal side, it's easy to despair. Jesus has a word for us, "Repent." Repentance is the refusal to despair. We do have good help: the ministry of angels. God has given each of us a guardian angel and we can call on St. Michael in the spiritual battle.

The ministry of angels can help a person have a new mind. For sure, we live among wild beasts and sometimes are tempted to think of ourselves as one more animal. Today's gospel calls us to lift up our heads, to recognize spiritual beings greater than us.

May we accept their ministry. Amen