

First Sunday of Lent “Repent & Believe!”

Gen 9:8-17; Ps 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Today we hear the incredible story of Jesus in the wilderness. The very same Spirit that gently descended upon Jesus and baptized him, now *drives* him into the wilderness, a place of utter desolation. Let me tell you, having spent a week in the desert wilderness areas of Israel, no amount of self-reliance, wit, skill, strength, or knowledge can save you. It is empty and dry. So for 40 days, Jesus has no one to rely upon except God.

Of course, the *40 days* is also highly significant. We are reminded that Noah sailed in the Ark during the flood of 40 days. Noah floated at the mercy of wind, wave, and tide. He had no control at all. And, even if he could control that floating box, there was no way that Noah could navigate. There were no “land” marks, no sun or stars through the overcast. Thus, Noah relied solely on faith that God would deliver his family safely to dry land. Self-reliance and self-motivation would not help, yet God did not fail Noah.

Much later, Moses also spends 40 days on top of a desolate, rocky Mt. Sinai, waiting for God’s precious gift of the Ten Commandments. There is absolutely nothing there, I know, I’ve been there. It is barren rock and rubble, there is nothing Moses can do to feed or save himself, except to trust in God. And God did not fail Moses either. What we learn is that no matter how barren or desolate our circumstances—even in the isolation of a COVID Pandemic, we can trust God and step-out in faith. And, much like those first disciples, we also learn as we go-along. The more we walk with Christ and engage Him in scripture, the more we gain understanding. This is a fundamental underpinning of our Christian faith. In the fourth century, the great St. Augustine of Hippo, tried very hard to understand God. He desperately wanted to have the faith he saw in others. But the more rational Augustine got, the less faith he had. It wasn’t until Augustine reversed his approach, and finally stepped-out solely in faith that real understanding began to flow. In the Middle Ages, this would come to be known as “faith seeking understanding.”

And that is what David is saying in his Psalm today: “*To you O God, I lift up my soul; Oh my God, in you I put my trust. Lead me in your truth and teach me....*” [25.1-2a] David understood that faith is the starting point. Unless you “believe,” you will never follow, you will never learn, and you will never understand. And that is why atheists will never understand. They’re looking through the wrong-end of a telescope. You will never see what you are looking at that way. A “telescope” is not a bad analogy for faith. In faith, we look through the small opening—the small opening of “faith.” As we extend the telescope, which gets bigger as each section slides out, our field of view also expands, and objects far-away grow ever more clear; we begin to see and understand things that we could not have seen or understood before.

If you want to know Christ, you simply must walk with him, study him, listen to him, spend time in scripture with him, which is precisely what the first disciples did as they sought to make Christ’s path their own. In other words, we simply cannot become a concert pianist by sitting down at a piano for only one hour a week, such skill takes time, discipline, and hard work. And real discipleship is no different. Jesus does not promise us, his followers, a “rose garden.” Quite the contrary, he promises our faith may well be a cross—a heavy burden. The good news is that we never have to carry the burden of our faith alone. Those who

walk in faith share the load with one another. We share that burden with all the saints who have gone before us and still walk with us, even now.

As Jesus comes forth from his trials and preparation in the wilderness, he emerges with a singular message: “*The time is now. The Kingdom is here. Repent and believe in the good news!” [1.15] Jesus literally, gives two orders. The first is to Repent, to “Go Back, Turn Around, Get-on the Right Track, get on the track back to God” And the second order tells us how to “get back to God.” Believe in the gospel! Well, to “*believe in the gospel*” is to put one’s faith in Jesus Christ! Because Jesus, himself, *is* the Good News; Jesus *is* the “Gospel.” To believe, to have faith, is not just to give our intellectual assent, but to commit ourselves, to surrender our whole being to the object of our belief. This is how we “return to God.”*

Lent gives us the measured time to turn around, to re-engage Christ, to align with others who also follow in faith, and to practice the hard discipline of keeping our eyes on the savior of the world. Lent is a time to focus the telescopic lens on Christ. Lent is a time to remember what those who look through the Telescope of Faith can see so clearly: that only God is absolute, only God is worth all of our trust, all of our faith. And the only real teacher we need to teach us and to guide us is the powerful Holy Spirit of God. Lent can be a time when faith can lead us to deeper understanding and to the startling awareness that it is also a time to identify our own path in a secular “wilderness” as we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

“Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.” Ps 25:4

What are the implications and meanings for *you* in today’s readings?

1. In his Letter, Peter likens Noah & his family’s salvation through the Flood to a type of baptism. Consider how this relates to your own Christian baptism.
 - a. How do you think Noah & his family felt when they finally set foot on dry land?
 - b. How does it feel to be saved by Jesus Christ?
 - c. From what are you being saved?
2. Imagine you were there to hear Jesus preach & say, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*”
 - a. How do you think you would have reacted?
 - b. What is “good news” for you today? And how is Christ a part of that good news?
3. COVID restrictions & isolation have left many people in a Spiritual & Emotional “wilderness” environment.
 - a. Reflect upon how this may be true for you. How has your faith been able to sustain you?
 - b. Do you have family and/or friends who are struggling in a “wilderness”? How can you help?

For the Biblical Scholars

- Can you name other biblical situations and persons where “40”—days, months, or years is significant?
- Our *Genesis* passage includes the “First” of Four major OT Covenants; what are the other three?