

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

February 18, 2018 First Sunday of Lent

We come together on this relatively beautiful day, after a little light snow last night, but now with blue skies and moderate temperatures, that makes us long for Spring which is now just a little more than a month away. On this First Sunday of Lent, the whole Christian community has entered fully into our 40-day Season of Renewal. So a good question to ask ourselves is where do we see ourselves at the end of our Lenten Journey? What, if anything, will change about our spiritual lives and our relationship with Jesus and the Body of Christ, the Church, over the course of these next six weeks?

Just four days ago, our Churches were filled to overflowing many times over as people came to receive blessed ashes, and hear the words: "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust, you shall return", or "Repent and believe the Gospel". But besides reminding us of "who" we are---our mortality and our sinfulness---- those ashes also are important reminders about "Whose" we are. We belong to God, the God of mercy, compassion and forgiveness---the God of Love Who established an unconditional Covenant of love. We heard about that Covenant in today's First Reading from the Book of Genesis. It was God's covenant---His promise---that He would never again bring a world-wide destructive flood upon the earth, and He sealed that covenant with a "sign": the rainbow!

So, this Season of Lent provides us with numerous opportunities to grow in God's love, and to renew our relationship with God, and with the Body of Christ. While resolutions like "giving up candy" or "not eating in between meals" or "spending 15 minutes more a day in prayer" are great, how is it that we intend to grow in our love for God and one another?

Every year on the First Sunday of Lent, our Gospel passage tells us about Jesus' 40 days in the desert and His temptations. This year we hear the shortest and most succinct account from St. Mark. In three brief verses, St. Mark tells us that right after Jesus was baptized, "*the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert*"---a very interesting choice of words, implying a certain amount of coercion or strong encouragement. The Spirit of God forced Jesus to go and confront the Tempter, immediately after He was baptized. There Jesus "*was tempted*" (though St. Mark doesn't tell us anything about them)....*was "among wild beasts....and "the angels ministered to Him.* And when the 40 days were over, He came out of the desert and

began “*proclaiming the Gospel of God.*” St. Mark makes it seem like those 40 days flew by in a “snap”. But we know that could not be the case, any more than these 40 days we’re in the midst of will “fly by”; Lent will last for 6 long weeks. But the most important point in this Gospel passage that we need to know is that Jesus, the Son of God, was tempted! He had to confront, head-on, Evil personified –Satan! And that’s never easy, or “a snap”.

This past week, besides the unlikely confluence of Valentine’s Day falling on the same day as Ash Wednesday, we were once again confronted by a despicable act of evil in our country on that same day in the mass shooting that took place in Parkdale, Florida where 17 people, mostly high school students but also including three adult teachers, were killed, dozens more injured, an entire community traumatized, and our entire country focused, yet again, on another senseless act of violence. The predictable debates about the need for more laws to control guns, or tighter security to be imposed in our schools, and the unfortunate finger-pointing taking place to try to lay blame somewhere has been taking place ever since. However, I think we all realize that we are facing an “evil” that can not be rooted out by laws, security measures or finding the persons responsible. The only true and lasting solution is to change people’s hearts away from the influence of sin and evil, and allow our hearts to be re-fashioned and renewed by turning back to God’s ways, and to choose to live in God’s Love.

It is important for us to know as today’s powerful Readings remind us that if Jesus Himself was tempted, we can certainly know that we will be tempted. Each of us; no exceptions. The nature and frequency of those temptations is known only to each of us; and sadly we know, and God knows, how often we succumb to those temptations and sin. We know that, even as baptized persons, we must confront Evil, and be tempted to turn away from God. That’s the “bad news” we hear today. The “good news” of today’s Readings is that, just like Jesus, we too have God’s Spirit who is with us through it all. In spite of the fact that we too have to live “among the wild beasts of sin and temptation” all around us, we also have God’s powerful grace available to us always, and the help provided through His Angels. We are never alone, because God is faithful to His Covenant of Love!

Through our special acts of prayer, fasting and self-denial, may we draw ever closer to the heart of Jesus. In Pope Francis’ Lenten Message to all Catholics throughout the world this year, he chose the theme: “*Because of the increase of iniquity, the love of many will grow cold.*” As we look around the world, and in particular to this most recent tragedy this past week, we see the signs of “iniquity”: sin, division, violence, disrespect in basic human communication on

social media and in personal interactions. We could very well say that this is the result of basic human love grown cold. Lent is the Season that calls us to turn away from “iniquity” of any sort--extreme and violent iniquity that we see all too often, or even the less, more mundane, forms of iniquity in our daily lives, such as lack of patience, irritability, short-tempered-ness that we have with those in our daily lives. Lent is a time to turn away from sin, and re-ignite our love grown cold into a flame of compassion and care.

Through our Lenten practices and prayers, may we be helped to focus on “who” we are-- - God’s daughters and sons---and “Whose” we are----that we belong to Christ! May we also be reminded “where” we are going, and how we intend to get there----that our final destination is Heaven, and the way to get there is to live each day being faithful to our Baptismal Promises.

These 40 days of Lent are extremely important for each of us, but they won’t go by in “snap”. We have to work hard, each day, to confront the Evil in our lives, and in the world around us, and choose to follow Christ and His ways, in renewed and refocused ways for these next 6 weeks. But at the end of Lent, we don’t just stop and revert back again to our old selves; no we pray that this time of Lent will make us new and renewed in our relationship with Jesus and His Church. Jesus’ first words when He came out of the 40 day desert experience were: *“The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”* Those are the words that we must remember, and live, all the days of our lives.

In 40 days, Easter will be here, and we will be rejoicing in Jesus’ victory over sin and death. Thanks be to God! But, that victory, though it is already ours, is one that we have to work hard to maintain each and every day, throughout Lent, after Easter, and each and every day of our lives. We have the “sign”, not only the sign of the Rainbow reminding us of God’s unconditional covenant, but the Sign of the Cross---the sign of our salvation. Let us then enter into this Season of Lent, not reluctantly, and not fearfully, but joyfully, ready to know that whatever we encounter, God’s Holy Spirit is with us through it all.

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley