

February 21, 2021 11:30 a.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

First Sunday of Lent

These last 10 days have been bitterly cold, and the snow, that just keeps falling, is steadily piling up, quickly approaching the “there’s no place else to put it” situation; and, it appears that there is more to come late today and into tomorrow. While this is inconvenient and (for many of us) unpleasant, at least we’re equipped here in southwest Michigan to handle it, and all of us are used to it. But much of the rest of the country, including parts---like Texas---that are not accustomed, nor equipped---are suffering greatly due to power outages, food and water shortages, and all the consequences that come with being exposed to these very harsh elements. Please join me in adding them to our special prayers and concern asking God’s special graces for all those suffering from these harsh wintry conditions during our time together here as we give our worship and praise to our Loving God. During times like this, we might try to comfort ourselves by thinking about when things will get better. Our weather forecast gives us cause for hope as temperatures in the 40’s are predicted for later this week. And did you know that Baseball Spring Training Camp begins tomorrow for our Detroit Tigers (and for the Pittsburgh Pirates too). And the best news of all is, the first day of Spring is less than a month away. So, we have reason to hope.

Speaking of reasons to have Hope, today is the First Sunday of Lent, and for the next 40 days, we prepare ourselves to celebrate the Feast of Easter---our greatest reason to be People of Hope. During this Season, we are all urged to focus on what in our lives needs to be “renewed”. As we heard Jesus Himself tell us just a few moments ago: *“This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”*

So, what in our lives needs to be renewed over the course of these next 6 weeks? From what particular sins, actions, attitudes, or choices do we need to repent? How strongly do we currently “believe in the Gospel”, and what can we do to strengthen our belief? Or to put it another way, what changes do we hope to see in ourselves at the end of our Lenten Journey?

Just 4 days ago, here in this Cathedral, we had “standing room only” as people thronged to Church for the 12:10 Mass, while of course following all the safe-distancing regulations, as Catholics, and many of our fellow Christians, did throughout the world. There’s something about Ash Wednesday that draws us to

receive Blessed Ashes, which is such a powerful symbol that speaks boldly to all of us. But when we stop and think about it, “Ashes” are not the most pleasant reminder---they’re what’s left after whatever it was before was burned. On Wednesday, those “ashes” were either sprinkled on our heads, or placed on our foreheads, with a somber reminder about our mortality and our need to repent. And it seems that no matter how strong, or lax, the practice of our faith is the other 364 days of the year, receiving those ashes on Ash Wednesday is very important; it serves as a reminder of who we are.

But, they also remind us about “Whose” we are. We belong to God. And our Faith assures us that even when our lives in this world come to an end, and our bodies return to dust, “WE” go on living because Jesus has brought us the Gift of Salvation. We belong to God, the God of mercy, compassion and forgiveness---the God Who established an unconditional Covenant of Love.

We heard about that Covenant in today’s First Reading from the Book of Genesis, in which God was speaking with Noah after he, his family, and an Ark-load of animals, birds and other critters, had navigated the Ark thru the Flood waters for the better part of a year, until the Flood waters had receded. In today’s Reading---only 7 verses long---God used the word “Covenant” 5 times. It was God’s covenant---His promise---that He would never again cause a world-wide destructive flood upon the earth. It was a “covenant” that God made, not just with Noah and his family, but with “all living beings...and with the Earth itself. And God sealed that covenant with a “sign”: the Rainbow! While the depravity of humankind is what led God to bring about the Great Flood which destroyed life, God’s new Covenant was a promise to focus on saving Life---for ever.

That’s why we heard St. Peter in today’s Second Reading say that *in the days of Noah...a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water.*” He then said *“this prefigured Baptism, which saves you now.”* So, God’s Covenant, symbolized by the Rainbow, promises everlasting Life with God.

So, I think an important question to ask ourselves is: how important is that “covenant” to you; to me?

A “covenant” is an agreement between two parties that is entered into willingly, and is motivated by the Love of the two parties for one another. The closest example of a “covenant”, that in any way is similar to the Covenant God makes with each of us, is the “covenant” between a husband and wife who give

themselves to one another, in love, thru the Sacrament of Marriage. The symbols of that covenant are the “wedding rings”. The Marriage Vows stipulate the agreement: to exclusively love each other as husband and wife, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death do you part. And if, or when, the relationship struggles, the couple---together---figures out a way to “renew” their covenant, to re-ignite the spark, to rediscover the passion---so that their relationship remains vibrant and strong.

That’s primarily what the Season of Lent is for---it’s intended to renew our covenant with God; it’s to help each of us to grow in our Love for God and one another. So, during this Season of Lent, we are urged to “pray, fast, and give alms/do acts of charity”, which is to help us to grow in God’s Love, and to renew our relationship with God, and with the Body of Christ. Our resolutions, like “giving up candy” or “not eating in between meals” or “spending 15 minutes more a day in prayer”, are great. But what do we want those “resolutions” to do? Is it just about “losing a few pounds?” Is it because we think Lent should make us feel “deprived”? Or can those resolutions help to re-ignite the “spark” and help our relationship with God to become one that’s alive, exciting and yes, even passionate?

Today’s 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 3 brief verses, St. Mark tells us that right after Jesus was baptized (which is a very important point), *“the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert”*. The Spirit of God urged Jesus to go for the purpose of directly confronting the *Tempter*, immediately after His Heavenly Father had affirmed Him as *“His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased”* when He was baptized. St. Mark just tells us that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert, “among wild beasts”, and that He *“was tempted”* (though St. Mark doesn’t provide any particular details about the temptations...and throughout the 40 days, *“the angels ministered to Him”*).

And then St. Mark takes us out of the desert and to the beginning of Jesus public ministry by telling us *“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 an instant. But those had to be 40 very long days, just as these next 40 days between now and Easter on April 4th provide us with 6 weeks of opportunities.

The reason why the Church wants us to hear about Jesus' Temptations every year on the First Sunday of Lent, from either the Gospel of Matthew, Luke or this year St. Mark, is to make sure that we know, and never forget that: Jesus, the Son of God, was tempted! He had to confront Evil personified –Satan—head-on! Jesus was tempted to misuse His divine powers for Himself---to doubt the Father's Love for Him---to fall down and worship a false god in exchange for personal power/prestige. We too, like Jesus, are tempted to commit sin in a hundred different ways; and we are tempted to be unfaithful to our Covenant with God. The fact is Evil is alive and well. There's no doubt that Satan is hard at work in our world. And Satan's greatest "tool" is deception---making something bad/wrong/evil look good/appealing/important.

So, one way to use well this season of Lent is to try to become more aware of what temptations each of us struggles with. And that begins by recognizing "temptations to sin" for what they are. That can only come if we take time to reflect on what's going on in our lives each day. And so, perhaps we can find time, each day during Lent, to take time for prayer when we ask ourselves if what we're doing, or saying, is what God would want me to do?

The other thing that's very important is to realize that temptations are not sins. We will be tempted; that's part of what it means to be human. But if we do sin, we can be confident that because of God's Covenant of Love, and because of Jesus' Gift of Salvation, we can be forgiven. As Pope Francis wrote so beautifully in his Lenten Message for this year: "Even in these times of trouble when everything seems fragile and uncertain because of the Covid-19 pandemic, ...Lent is precisely the season of hope, when we turn back to God Who patiently cares for His creation....By receiving forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance that lies at the heart of our process of conversion, we in turn can spread forgiveness to others."

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. Even though we live "among the wild beasts" of sin and temptation all around us, we also have God's powerful grace available to us, 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. As we look around the world, and as we all worry about the deep divisions within our own country, we see the effects of sin: anger, hatred, violence, a lack of respect in basic human interactions, and through social communications on social media. Perhaps all of

that is the result of a collective failure to be faithful to the Covenant with God which He so badly wants to have with all of us.

Lent is the Season that calls us to turn away from all sin---in its most extreme expressions of violence and hatred, or even the lesser expressions that we find in our daily lives, such as lack of patience, irritability, short-tempered-ness, with those around us. Lent is also the season to be tuned into the temptations to sin, and to do whatever we need to do to strengthen our relationship with our Loving God, and with the rest of the Body of Christ“, so that we can 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.

Jesus told us today that *“This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand.”* I think what Jesus was saying, as He stood up to Satan and would ultimately defeat him thru His Passion, Death and Resurrection which we’ll celebrate in 6 weeks, is that He has come into our world to be the “fulfillment” of God’s Promises—the Covenant that He made to Noah, and again to Abraham, and throughout the Old Testament. Lent is the time for us to renew our commitment to be faithful to our Promises that we made/were made for us on the day of our Baptism: to know that God loves us unconditionally, and to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as we love ourselves.

These 40 days of Lent are extremely important for each of us; they won’t “fly by”, but unless we intentionally make use of each of these days by focusing on renewing our Covenant/Relationship with God, they may pass us right by. We need to confront the Evil in our lives, and in the world around us, and choose to follow Christ and His ways. Let us pray that this Lent will renew us in our relationship with Jesus and His Church. Jesus told us what to do: *“Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”* Those are the words that we must remember, and live, all the days 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 joyfully enter into this Season of Lent, ready to know that whatever we encounter, God’s Holy Spirit is with us through it all---we are never alone.