

## **From Ashes to Springtime of the Heart**

February 21, 2021, First Sunday of Lent

Gospel of Mark 1:12-15

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When we reflect on what is happening in the world, weather wise, political wise, pandemic wise, it prompts some to proclaim that it is the beginning of the end of the world. From time immemorial, there have been groups who rally together to make such pronouncements, predicting the end and these are the signs.

On the other hand, there are other groups that ignore what's happening in the world go on with life like nothing is changing and they just maintain the status quo; these crises not registering as a signal for the need for an active response. In other words, 'the environment will be fine.'

Perhaps a more balanced approach would be to be weary of both ways of thinking. Think of Noah. His story has something to say about both ways of thinking. The *status quo* people were probably thinking, 'Ah, Noah was blowing smoke' and off his rocker for building an ark. Disaster, what flood disaster? The message being NO NEED TO CHANGE COURSE, WE ARE ALL FINE. And yet the floods came. He was right.

On the other hand, there is a long list of historical events whereby groups predicted the end of the world, prepared in their own way, and it never happened. People got themselves all anxious and worked up and over nothing. In the story of Jonah, he proclaimed disaster on Nineveh and what eventually happened, much to Jonah's chagrin, nothing....no disaster. However, as the narrative plays out, it was because they repented and humbled themselves before God that they were spared. They turned back to God as a community and that saved them.

So what do we learn from this?....human beings can be both too alarmist on the one hand, and on the other hand be too complacent. Each one of us has to make our own decisions as to what we make of world events. We don't want to be too complacent but we don't want to jump the gun either. The only possible answer is, "Wait and see." "Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." In the meantime we don't know so we best humble ourselves and pay attention and wait.

So here we are, while we are waiting and discerning, we enter the season of Lent together. For the next several Sundays we get to ponder together the unfolding reality of God's relationship with His creation.

In our first reading from Genesis God bestows His covenant by saying: *"I will establish my covenant with you... and with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every wild beast with you: everything that lives on the earth..."* (one may want to apply this message to the question of whether or not God saves animals, especially our pets.) The covenant spoken about here looks to be more far reaching and inclusive than

we might think. Pastoral versus militant, covenant versus contract, parental versus drill sergeant.

A covenant, unlike a contract, is an agreement that is personal and makes room for particular circumstances. God's covenant is not a contract, but an actual promise and commitment of love that comes straight from God's heart. In a contract, if one party defaults, the relationship is broken and other proceedings of compensation must be made by the one who defaulted, if there is to be a reestablishment of that relationship. *As a kid, I knew that when I crossed the line in terms of behaviour that there would be consequences, but I also knew that underneath those consequences which were usually not so pleasant, that my parents still loved me.*

In God's covenant, even if we default, God remains faithful to His promise to us. And thankfully this is so because we do cross the line in our human fragility. The story of Noah teaches us about a covenant between God and humanity that will never be withdrawn by God. Noah represents the goodness of God's creation that remains in humanity in spite of sin in the world.

Another way of looking at the story of Noah is to see the raging waters of the flood as representative of the fears and anxieties each of us face in life. These challenges can be overwhelming and they may lead us to abandon our side of the covenant. But whether called or not, God is there.

As we begin the season of Lent, it's good to **remember** that whether we push God away in anger or fear, or find ourselves pulled with a current of discontent or confusion, self-hatred, or self-interest, or frustration over the pandemic or the other crises that pop up in our lives, remember that God is faithful to **the personal covenant of love that comes to each one of us from the heart of God.**

Then there is the **desert image** in our Gospel today. Jesus is impelled by the Spirit out into the desert. Lent traditionally is a time when we examine our inner lives for any self-destructive behaviour. The desert can, in its own way, remove us from the drowning waters of everyday life. When we feel overwhelmed we are usually not in a very receptive frame of mind to hear the voice of God.

Heading to the desert may not be something we feel like. Scripture says Jesus was **driven out into the wilderness**...which suggests to me that, left to his own devices, he may well have chosen otherwise. Even Jesus needed divine help.

Yet it is in this desert, away from earthly and other human distractions, that Jesus comes to face to face with his humanity and the Spirit of God within Him - - the very source of life that needs to break open for the life of the world. There is something about each one of us that needs to break open for the life of the world.

The word '*Lent*' comes from the old English word for **springtime** when, the lengthening of days unfolds and the buds start to appear on the trees.

Perhaps we can think of Lent as being a time for us to restore ourselves to a deeper awareness and sensitivity to the beauty of life as it blossoms forth as manifested by the spring time.

Maybe the desert for us, will be time offered in more frequent prayer. Maybe we will try to fast from unhealthy habits, from things that we know are unnecessary and unhelpful for our lives. And maybe desert time will sharpen our senses and we'll become more awake and alive to the newness of life blossoming all around us. It's not life in the world that gets tired and old, it's our perception of it that does. It is our perception that needs to be renewed. Maybe then, we will begin to hear the softly spoken and unexpected invitation of God who finally gets our attention in a way that has not happened before or at least, not for a long time.

Remember, after the desert experience Jesus was ready to begin his ministry of initiating and proclaiming the Gospel with his life. That after all is our baptismal call. We've already been through the waters of baptism. So, go to the desert, and wait and see how God is calling us in this Lenten season. Amen.