

## Flooded by Covenantal Love

**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent** – Cycle B – February 21, 2021

**Readings:** Gen 9:8-15; 1 Pet 3:18-22; Mk 1:12-15

*“I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood” (Gen 9:11)*

Prologue: Covenant is one of the core biblical motifs that describes God’s relationship with people. The biblical covenant is always one between unequal partners. While one party, God, is always faithful to the divine promises, the other, humankind, proves to be a fickle-minded, unfaithful partner that forsakes God and worships idols, failing to be the ‘contrast community’ that God expects it to be. However, Jesus comes to establish a new covenant: interior and perfect.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading describes the covenant that Yahweh makes with Noah. This is a universal covenant made with all peoples, unlike the one made in the time of Moses that was limited to the Israelites only. The waters of the flood are symbolic of a general cleansing of the earth, purging it of the sins of all the people whose “thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). The covenant with Noah is one of promise, preservation and salvation. God promises: “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark” (vv.9-10). Indeed, this is truly a cosmic covenant, embracing the whole earth and all God’s creatures therein. In a three-tiered cosmology prevalent in biblical times, viewed through God’s eyes ‘up there’, the two arms of the rainbow (v.13) seem to embrace all living beings and humankind without distinctions of creaturehood, creed, country, culture, caste or colour. By virtue of the washing and cleansing that takes place on account of the flood, water will come to be regarded in the Second Testament as symbolic of Christian Baptism, a point which will be taken up in today’s second reading. It’s important to note that this covenant—and every one of them, for that matter—expresses God’s love and faithfulness. God will remain loving and faithful till the very end despite the infidelity, idolatry and insolence of humankind.
2. Today’s passage from Mark’s gospel describes the launching of Jesus’ ministry but without the details of the fasting and threefold temptations that appear in the other two synoptic gospels. While the cleansing in Noah’s time is carried out by the waters of the flood, followed by the sealing of a covenant, the time is now ripe for a new covenant with salvific activity springing up from the wilderness: desert. John the Baptist, the cousin-herald of the Messiah, is prototype of the wilderness in his austere lifestyle and message of repentance. Now, Jesus’ mission will take off from where John’s ministry tapers off. Both cousins are Spirit-filled. This same Spirit “drove him [Jesus] out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness *forty days*, tempted by Satan; and he was with the *wild beasts*; and *the angels* waited on him” (vv.12,13). The number ‘forty’ is symbolic of the flood which lasted 40 days (Gen 7:17), of the 40 years of the Israelites journeying in the desert during the Exodus (Num 32:13) and of the 40 days of Moses’ fast before receiving God’s commandments (Ex 24:18). While the people of Israel failed the test and abandoned God, Jesus would remain faithful despite the temptations. Throughout his life Jesus would be confronted with “wild beasts” in the form of many

controversies, conflicts and clashes which he would boldly face, culminating with the crucifixion. Jesus perseveringly preaches Good News in a bad world, so to say.

3. The core of Jesus' Good News is: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near" (v.15). Jesus proclaims God's Reign in his own coming where goodness will destroy evil, love will overcome hate, and life will triumph over death. The sole condition for the coming of this Kingdom is "repent"! (v.15). One only has to tread the path of *metanoia*, a 're-turn' or turnaround towards the One who is Love. Simply put, the Good News is "God loves me" and "God loves you". That's why in the very first Lenten reading on Ash Wednesday, Yahweh tells the people: "Return to me with all your *heart!* Rend your *heart*, not your garments!" (Joel 2:12-13). The Lenten observances—prayer, fasting and almsgiving—have meaning only in the light of love. Without love, any forms of prayer, fasting and almsgiving can only degenerate into external displays of piety, hypocrisy and pride. The '*angels*' who waited on Jesus in the wilderness are the godly, good spirits—visible and invisible, persons past and present, graces and gifts of the Spirit—which help us to love and to reach the Source of all Love: God. The same Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness drives you and me into the wilderness to be tamed and to '*re-turn*' to God with all our heart. Are we ready?

**Possible Link of the Psalm and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading to the Theme:**

- The responsorial psalm (25) reiterates the covenantal theme fortified by God's faithfulness and love. "Your ways, Lord, are faithfulness and love for those who keep your covenant." Am I/We aware that I/We am/are wedded to God by everlasting, covenantal love?
- Today's second reading from the first Letter of Peter juxtaposes Noah's Ark and Christ's Bark, the Church. We see here how after Jesus' resurrection, the Christian community interprets the flood story in the light of Christian baptism. Thus, just as evil was destroyed by the flood waters, so is human evil washed away by baptismal waters. However, baptism is no guilt-edged security for gaining heaven. There's need of personal repentance and *re-turning Godwards*—to savour God's love and spread this Good News.

**Pope Francis' Message for Lent 2021: "*Lent: A Time for Renewing Faith, Hope and Love*"**

- "During Lent, let us renew our *faith*, draw from the 'living water' of *hope*, and receive with open hearts the *love* of God, who makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. ...."
- "*Fasting, prayer and almsgiving*, as preached by Jesus (Mt 6:1-18), enable and express our conversion. The path of poverty and self-denial (*fasting*), concern and loving care for the poor (*almsgiving*), and childlike dialogue with the Father (*prayer*) make it possible for us to live lives of sincere faith, living hope and effective charity."
- "*Lent is a time for believing*, for welcoming God into our lives and allowing him to 'make his dwelling' among us (Jn 14:23). Fasting involves being freed from all that weighs us down—like consumerism or an excess of information, whether true or false—in order to open the doors of our hearts to the One who comes to us, poor in all things, yet "full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14): The Son of God our Saviour.

**In Lighter Vein:** A pediatrician would plug his stethoscope into his little patients' ears to let them listen to their own heartbeats. Their eyes would always light up with awe. He was taken aback one day when he placed the disk over a little girl's heart. "Listen!" said the doctor, "What do you think that is?" She listened carefully at the tap-tap-tapping in her chest and cried, "Is that Jesus knocking?" Indeed, Jesus knocks at my heart (see Rev 3:20) so that I might rend my heart, repent and *re-turn* to God and believe in the Good News: God loves me, God loves you!

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