

**First
Sunday
of Lent**

Year B



FIRST READING
Genesis 9:8–15

PSALM
Psalm 25:4–9

SECOND READING
1 Peter 3:18–22

GOSPEL
Mark 1:12–15

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PRAYER

Psalm 25:4–9

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD,
and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins
of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love
remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners
in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

READING THE WORD

First Reading

Genesis 9:8–15

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, 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. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off

by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

Second Reading

1 Peter 3:18–22

Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Gospel

Mark 1:12–15

The Spirit immediately drove 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. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

HEARING THE WORD

"God is in Control"

As we begin the Lenten season, the Word of God invites us to recognize that God is in control of the world and history, in spite of human sinfulness and wickedness. Though human beings may yield to temptations, and act contrary to the divine plan, God in his wisdom chooses to manifest his love for the people through his benevolent actions, and to guide

human destiny towards salvation.

The first reading, taken from the book of Genesis, makes known God's unconditional covenant with Noah. This covenant concludes the tragic story of the flood (Gen 6:5 - 9:19) with God's sure promise never again to destroy the earth. The text is rich in imagery and vivid in description. The flood symbolizes the "de-creation" of the world - the undoing of creation described in Gen chs 1-2, and the end of all life. This disaster was caused by human wickedness. Evil found its way into the peoples' hearts to such an extent, that God regretted creating humanity (Gen 6:5). However, the covenant with Noah shows God's gracious and unconditional commitment to the human family, and to the whole of creation. This covenant and the subsequent restoration of the cosmic order is, in a way, an act of "re-creation" of the world.

In Hebrew, making of the covenant literally means the "cutting" of the covenant. The covenant creates a profound bond between God and his creation that affects the future. "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature..., that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." These verses reveal that God manages his creation, including humans and animals, and that God gra-

ciously decided to sustain forever the life he created. The rainbow in the clouds is the sign of God's covenant, and God's commitment to life. It is a profound symbol of the divine decision to fight relentlessly against the powers of death, including the evil which causes destruction.

This text affirms that God does not give up on his purposes and plans for humanity and creation. When human wickedness threatened God's handiwork, God still found a way and means to accomplish his divine plan. In the face of impending doom, he chose a single person, a single family to achieve his saving purpose. All that Noah did was to listen to God's instructions obediently and carry them out without doubt or disbelief. All life on earth was preserved through this act of Noah's trustful obedience.

In the second reading, Peter underlines God's presence with the suffering Christians. He helps the faithful to understand the deeper meaning of their anguish in the light of the suffering of Christ. Making use of ancient baptismal formula in vv. 18-22, the author likens the waters of the flood to the waters of baptism. However, unlike the waters of the flood intended to destroy, the water of baptism has saving power. As Noah and his family were saved from the waters of the flood because of his obedience to God's word, so also the Christian believers are saved through the waters of Baptism.

The author writes these words to the persecuted Christians faced with a hard choice - either to give up their faith and turn to their former evil ways, or face suffering for doing good. Peter encourages them to opt for faith, no matter what it might cost. To motivate them to choose good, he presents them with the portrait of the suffering Christ, so that they may realize that God who raised Jesus from the dead has the last word, and not evil. Like Jesus, they too can bear witness in their suffering, knowing that suffering, for doing good, will lead them to eternal life together with the Risen Lord. With these words and images, Peter encourages the suffering Christians not to give up, but to hold fast to their faith, which they received in baptism. Despite their trials and tribulations, God does not abandon them, for his own Son suffered at the hands of the wicked and emerged victorious. God is in charge of human destiny and even death cannot alter this.

In the Gospel reading, St Mark presents the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, which Jesus faced immediately after his baptism and before the beginning of his messianic ministry. With his typical brevity Mark emphasizes that God was with Jesus through this trial. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not mention that Jesus' resisted the three-fold temptation by citing the words of Scriptures to fight off the tempter. The tempter who attempted

to detract Jesus from his unreserved commitment to God's will, and away from his messianic task. Instead, Mark reports that Jesus was with the wild beasts, wrestling with the power of Satan in the wilderness.

The wilderness in the Bible is an ambivalent image, with both positive and negative connotations. It is a place of deprivation, the site of danger and death, rebellion, punishment, temptation and a dwelling place of evil spirits. However, the wilderness is also a place of deliverance, where God works miracles and reveals his will through the making of the covenant and the giving of the commandments. Several biblical characters experienced the wilderness as a place of refuge and safety, while others were driven from their homes into the wilderness because of their witness and prophetic message. Overall, the desert is a place where a person confronts their fears and desires, and must decide whether to put his or her life in the service of God or turn away from him.

Jesus faced Satan in the wilderness, but he was not alone. The wild beasts who were with him represent God's creation, while the angels serving him represent God care and support for his Son. Jesus faced his opponent with the power of God. Although Mark does not say a word about Jesus' decisive victory over Satan, we know that he prevailed, as in the very next verse Jesus initiates his messianic ministry with proclamation of the arrival of God's king-

dom, and a call to repentance and faith. God was with him when he was making his choices in the desert.

The liturgy of this first Sunday of Lent proclaims that God is with his people, guiding them towards himself. The rainbow in the sky testifies to God's sovereignty over life and creation, which even human wickedness could not destroy. Baptism reveals the power of God guiding human destiny towards eternity, the purpose which even suffering and persecution cannot frustrate. In Jesus' messianic mission we see God's kingdom descending into the midst of humanity, which even Satan could not prevent. Embarking on the Lenten journey, Christians are thus given firm reassurance about God's guiding hand and power supporting them, as they face their desert choices, and they pray with the psalmist, "Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation, for you I wait all day long."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Today we begin the season of Lent, a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter, the central and most important season in the Church's calendar. The theme for this Sunday leads us to recognize that God is in control of human destiny, and each person's life. In this context, the Church gives us the Lenten period to examine our Christian living, to see whether our lives are truly directed by God's will, and whether we consciously

and willingly place ourselves under God's guidance.

First, to place ourselves under God's power, we need to recognize that all we are, and have, results from God's grace. The first reading shows us God taking the initiative to enter into the covenant with Noah. This covenant ensures that life can continue. Indeed, this is the very foundation for our life. We have life because of God's grace. The idea of a covenant is not foreign in our African tradition. Our ancestors used to exchange with each other a coffee seed smeared with blood as a sign of establishing an everlasting relationship. It was referred to as "cutting on the stomach" as a mark of the covenant. We see God entering a covenant with us through Noah. God establishes himself as the one in control of our destiny through his benevolent love. In this grace we stand and live each moment of our life.

Second, today's liturgy reminds us that our faith and commitment to God will be challenged, but God will stand with us in our trials. The second reading shows how our baptism is a sign of our covenant with God. At baptism, we entered into a covenantal relationship with God, but not through the blood smeared on coffee seeds as our ancestors did. We became children of God, destined for salvation, through being linked to Christ in a unique, spiritual way. However, this relationship attained at baptism is only the beginning of our journey with God. Our faith is still subject to daily tests and challenges.

On our continent, we hear about religious persecutions of Christians in Egypt, about misdeeds of people who claim to be Christians but do not live in Christian ways, even about religious leaders such as bishops and priests doing things contrary to God's ways. Our own faith is continuously tested through the daily hardships we encounter. Such hardships include the struggle to provide for our families, to educate our children, the loss of our loved ones, a seeming lack of response from God. All these and other similar challenges might tempt us to give up. Peter exhorts us to hold fast to our faith, and emphasizes that God is with us through these trials, just as he was with Jesus during his desert temptations. In those threatening circumstances, God does not abandon us, he is in fact closer to us than we could imagine.

Finally, we are being made aware today that being in the covenant with God demands our active response. As Christians we remain frail and weak even after baptism. Through baptism we receive the graces that enable us to begin a journey towards our full salvation. But we journey in company with others. On this journey we sometimes miss the mark and stray from God's paths, damaging our relationship with others. The time of Lent is a time for the renewal of any relationships with our fellow pilgrims which have become strained. On some occasions we yield to pride, sinful inclinations, and temptations to use others for our own benefit. Through such mistreatment we damage others and make their lives

more difficult. Lent calls for examination of our relationship with our neighbours - wife, children, relatives, friends and work mates - with anybody we influence and upon whom we have an impact. Are we helping them to walk in God's ways, or is our presence and behaviour an obstacle and hindrance in their journey of Christian life?

Beginning the season of Lent, we are guided to reflect on our life lived under God's authority, God's covenant. As the people who live because of God's covenant, we also ought to live by God's covenant. This means allowing God to be in control of our lives, by trusting in his closeness, and relating to our fellow pilgrims, following the way as taught by Jesus. Let our Lenten season be a time of renewal, of re-placing ourselves under God's authority, and helping others to do the same.

PROVERB

*“Where God is,
even a bull
can produce twins.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

Do I hold fast to my faith when faced with challenges? Do I seek to see God's presence when challenged? Am I helping others to walk in God's ways? Or is my presence and behaviour an obstacle and hindrance in their journey of Christian life?

Response to God:

During the entire Lenten season, I will begin each day with a prayer of thanksgiving for the covenant God made with me, the covenant shown in giving me life for yet another day. I will make this prayer like a rainbow present above all that I do this day.

Response to your World:

I will set a day of fasting and prayer for each week in this Lenten period. I will devote it to reflection and prayer focused on the strengthening of my relationship to God in time of trials and temptations.

As a group, we shall organise a renewal seminar, and discuss the relationships within our group, with the focus on defining how we can help one another to face challenges and temptations. This will be followed by a penitential service for our members and others willing to join.

PRAYER

*God of mercy and compassion,
look with favour on us
as we begin this Lenten season.
Grant us, we beseech you,
the grace to recognise
your enduring presence
even in moments
when our faith is put to the test.
Give us the strength
to overcome all that seeks
to draw us away from you.
We ask this
through Jesus Christ our Lord
who lives and reigns with you,
one God forever and ever.
Amen.*