

1st Sunday of Lent Cycle B

OPENING PRAYER

Readings:

Genesis 9:8-15
Psalm 25:4-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15

Loving God, as we begin our Lenten journey, give us the grace to remain faithful and true to you who are fully present in our deepest self, in every person, and in all creation. Help us to live each day as you intend us to live as your daughters and sons working toward building your reign on earth. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your son and our redeemer. Amen.

COMMENTARY ON THE WORD OF GOD

The rainbow serves as a reminder of God's unconditional love and mercy toward the people of God. It is this relationship, which God initiated, that emboldens Jesus to remain true to himself and to freely choose to remain faithful to God in the face of temptation. It is our grace and dignity as daughters and sons of God to honor God in one another and in our own self. In this way we help to bring about the reign of God in our time and place as God's beloved in whom God is well pleased.

THE HEART OF GOD: MERCY AND LOVE

"When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and every living creature..." (Genesis 9:14-15a). God places a reminder into his own creation, a rainbow, to remind himself of his own merciful nature that motivated him to make this absolutely irrevocable, unilateral, and utterly unconditional pledge to us and to all of creation. In total freedom, independent of anyone or anything, God decides and acts out of the very heart and center of who God is and, thus, reveals something about God's very being, namely love and mercy. In Hebrew anthropology the heart is not primarily the center of emotion but the source of intellect and will.

If God's being is full of mercy and love then why did God send the flood in the first place? What was it that made God so upset? In chapter six of Genesis we read that the sons of heaven, the giants, the heroes of old, the men of renown saw how beautiful the daughters were, and so they took for their wives as many of them as they chose (cf. 6:2). God was willing to wipe

out his whole creation when he saw the "wickedness on earth, and how every desire that their heart conceived was ever anything but evil" (Genesis 6:5). So, God regrets his works and decides to wipe out his whole creation (cf.6:6-7). "But Noah found favor with the Lord" (6:8). God commissions him to build the ark and to save himself together with a small part of what God had created.

Scripture does not elaborate on how exactly Noah found favor with God. The reader is left to assume that he simply did not participate in the kind of behaviors that led to the destruction: the disrespect and maltreatment of women. Pope Francis writes that woman is "the great gift of God," able to "bring harmony to creation." Perhaps referring to this account in Genesis, he says that if "exploiting people is a crime harmful to humanity, [then] exploiting a woman is all the more so, [because] it is destroying the harmony that God wanted to give the world." (Pope Francis' homily February 9, 2017.)

CONFIDANT TRUST IN GOD

The psalm in today's liturgy is an act of faith and a heart-felt plea. Here the psalmist reminds God of the heart of divine nature: "Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love" (Psalm 25:6). Like Noah, this faith-filled person waits in confident trust in God's very center, God's identity. "Because of your goodness, Lord (25:7c), remember no more the sins of my youth; remember me only in light of your love" (25:7).

REVEALING GOD BY OUR LIVES

God saved us while we were still sinners. "It is not a removal of dirt ... but an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). This is our invitation to mirror God's freedom to live out of our own heart and center with a clear conscience. God, who is love and mercy, is our deepest identity. God gave each of us the dignity and freedom to choose to live out of God's very self, present in our hearts, our intellect and will, and thus reveal God's own self in every moment of our lives.

GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE

This reality is further highlighted in today's Gospel reading that immediately follows the Baptism of Jesus. "The Spirit...descending upon him...and a voice came from the heavens, 'You are my beloved...with you I am well pleased'"(cf. Mark 1:10-11). God blessed Jesus at his baptism; God also blesses all of us, God's daughters and sons, at our baptism. Notice that Jesus is baptized before being driven into the desert to be tempted by Satan. God did not wait for Jesus to renounce Satan's temptations before welcoming

him as his beloved. God's welcome and acceptance comes first for Jesus and all those who follow. As we find ourselves among "wild beasts" who test our needs for survival and security, power and control, and affection and esteem, so too God does not abandon us but rather sends angels to minister to us as well. While Jesus was tempted, he did not sin. In freedom, he chose to be true to his conscience, his deepest, truest self, his divine nature. In Jesus' first words in this Gospel we hear: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand" (1:15).

Jesus was empowered to live out of his deepest center and, in freedom, to act true to his fully human and fully divine nature. Even in the face of the fiercest challenges, he found the courage and strength to follow his conscience. The freedom to act in accordance with who we are, to remain in God, as God remains in and with us, is our birthright as God's beloved. Our deepest longing is fulfilled when God's very own life can flow through us into all of our relationships, and into all of God's creation, so that love and mercy may continue to give life in our world today.

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SAINT OF THE WEEK

ST. LOUIS MARTIN
Feast Day – July 12

Louis Martin, our Saint of the Week, in his youth had wanted to become a monk but was rejected because of his inability to master Latin. As a result he became a clock maker. He married Zelig Guerin and they had nine children, four of whom died in infancy or early childhood. This loving couple provided a God-filled home for their five surviving daughters who all became nuns. One was Saint Therese of Lisieux, known as "The Little Flower." Louis and Zelig attended the daily 5:30 a.m. workers' Mass so that they could worship with the poor who were always welcomed in their home.

After his wife died, Louis became a very active member of the Saint Vincent Society. When he suffered two strokes that left him physically and mentally paralyzed, he was hospitalized in an asylum for three years until shortly before his death in 1894. Pope Francis canonized Louis Martin on October 8, 2015.

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MEMORY VERSE

*"You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him alone shall you serve."*

LUKE 4:8

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

Discuss the following questions.

1. In Genesis, God gives us a rainbow as a sign of God's identity, namely mercy and love. When have I experienced God's mercy and love personally?
2. The psalmist, a faith-filled person waits in confident trust in God's steadfast love. When have I found it difficult to trust in God's love and forgiveness? What did I do? Why was it so difficult?
3. When have I been able to follow my conscience and live as a true disciple of Jesus? What happened? In what ways have I grown in living as a disciple of Jesus?
4. God saved us while we were still sinners. God doesn't wait for us to shape up before offering us unconditional love. What is my response to this wonderful truth?
5. The three traditional pillars of Lenten observance are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. What is my Lenten resolution concerning prayer? What will I fast from this Lent: food, gossip, judging others...? To what individuals or groups will I give alms this Lent?

LIVING AS DISCIPLES

Select one or more of the following actions, or one of your own choosing, to do this week. Be prepared to share with your group how this experience affected your faith journey.

1. At the end of each day, using the examen of consciousness, look back on your day and recall when you were aware of God's love and mercy and also the times you failed to see God's love and mercy. Make a resolution to become more aware tomorrow.
2. Make an effort to live a joy-filled life thankful for God's gifts to you. In the evening, write down the reasons you are thankful to God that day.

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3. Write a prayer or poem about God's goodness to you.
4. Decide to contribute during Lent to the Rice Bowl collection, CRS, or some local charity.
5. Make a list of concrete steps you have taken this week to contribute to the harmony that God intended for the world.
6. Attend the Rite of Election on the first Sunday of Lent in your diocese and/or pray for those entering the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil.
7. Pray and reflect on the Memory verse this week. You may want to write your reflection and share it with your group.

CLOSING PRAYER AND RITUAL

Gather around a table with a Bible, a crucifix, a lighted candle, and a picture of a rainbow for each participant.

Leader: Good and gracious God, thank you for your mercy and steadfast love. May we always be aware of your presence and thankful for your goodness to us.

One by one, each person takes a rainbow picture and says:

Lord, thank you for your great love and mercy, especially for ...

After each person speaks all respond:

All: Loving and merciful God, hear our prayer.

Closing Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for always being with us and answering our prayers.

Optional: *Close with a song of God's love and mercy.*

Exchange a sign of peace.