**Homily for the First Sunday of Lent, Year B**

**February 21, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Genesis 9:8-15 (God makes a covenant with Noah.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 25 (Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22 (The flood prefigured baptism, which saves you now.)*

*Gospel: Mark 1:12-15 (Jesus is driven out into the desert to be tempted by Satan.)*

Every year, on the First Sunday of Lent, we hear about the Spirit driving Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by Satan. This year we get the short version, from the Gospel of Mark. Unlike Matthew and Luke, who describe three specific temptations that Jesus has to confront, Mark seems to think that what really matters is simply the fact that Jesus undergoes this period of testing. It must be an important moment for Jesus, but Mark never explains why it’s so significant.

Forty is a symbolic and sacred number in Scripture, often associated with times of trial or testing, as well as purification and preparation. For example, the great flood, which swept up Noah and his ark and washed away all sin from the earth, lasted 40 days. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai, awaiting the Ten Commandments from God. According to St. Luke, Jesus appeared for 40 days after his resurrection, before ascending into heaven. And, of course, the Israelites spent 40 *years* in the desert before reaching the Promised Land. There are roughly 150 more examples in the Old Testament, but suffice it to say that the number 40 is a clear sign that something important and necessary was happening to Jesus out there among the wild beasts. The Spirit “drove” Jesus out into the desert for a reason.

The last thing that happens before the temptation in the desert is Jesus’ baptism. Just imagine that scene. Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descend upon him and hears the voice of the Father proclaim, “You are my beloved Son.” We can only guess what impact that experience had on Jesus – emotionally, spiritually or intellectually – because the next thing we know, the Spirit is sending him off to the desert. Might this 40 days be a time for Jesus to process what just happened and to discern what comes next? As soon as he returns from the desert, he immediately begins his public ministry, and he appears quite confident that he knows exactly what the Father wants from him. Maybe that *clarity of purpose* is what he was supposed to discover out there in the wilderness.

Some people might be bothered by the notion that Jesus had to discern anything. After all, he is God. But, let’s not forget that Jesus is also *fully human*, and we know how human beings grow in wisdom and knowledge. It’s a continual process of gathering new information and receiving new insights and integrating them into what we already know. Jesus had to learn the same way. Granted, he probably learned a lot more by direct revelation from his Father, but every new idea still needed to be translated into concepts that his human mind could grasp and articulate in human speech. Jesus didn’t emerge from the womb knowing that he was the Messiah and the Son of God. Maybe he still wasn’t so sure even at the time of his baptism. But, by the time he returned from his 40 days in the desert, he seemed to have it all figured out. He seemed clear about who he was and what he was called to do, and he also seemed very determined to carry out his mission.

Like the 40-day periods in Scripture, the 40 days before Easter is also a symbolic and sacred time for the Church. Originally, it was a time of purification and enlightenment *only* for catechumens preparing for baptism. But, eventually, the *whole Church* came to share in the catechumens’ journey. Now, all of us embrace the season of Lent as a special time of repentance, purification and spiritual growth. The Church even suggests three traditional Lenten practices to help us: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We already do them to some extent throughout the year. So, the questions for us to consider now are *how*, and *for what purpose*, will we pray, fast and give alms during *these 40 days*?

I’d like to suggest two distinct ways to understand Lenten practices and their potential benefits. One is to think of Lenten practices as temporary *changes to our routine*, to help us be more mindful of what we are doing and how we are living. For example, something as simple as abstaining from meat on Fridays forces us to think about what we eat, how numerous our food options are, and how blessed we are to have such an abundance. This small act of fasting could make us more grateful for *all* of the food that we receive. In addition, our *voluntary* fasting could also raise our awareness of the many people in the world and in our own community for whom going hungry is *not* a choice, but a sad fact of life. Giving alms to the poor can have a similar effect, reminding us that what we consider an insignificant sum of money can mean a lot more to someone in desperate need.

Temporary changes to our prayer routine during Lent also can be beneficial. It’s easy to get stuck in a rut with our prayer, just doing the same old thing every time. Trying something new can be refreshing, and it can help us to enter more deeply into the spirit of a special liturgical season. For example, many people like to pray the Stations of the Cross during Lent. That traditional means of meditating on the Lord’s passion can really bring the celebration of Holy Week alive for us in a new way.

The second way to understand Lenten practices is not as a *temporary* change just for the period of Lent, but as a means to achieve a *permanent* change after Lent has ended. After all, 40 days is enough time to form a new habit or break an old one. So, we can resolve to be different in some way by Easter, and then use these next few weeks as our opportunity to move gradually toward that goal. Of course, this approach to Lent requires us to evaluate our prayer, fasting and almsgiving differently. If learning to adopt a new discipline or way of life is our long-term goal, then we need to be patient with our failures along the way. The stumbles are only temporary setbacks, if we reach our goal in the end.

The important thing to remember is that our Lenten practices are not ends in themselves, but means to achieve some type of spiritual growth. We can focus on a temporary but more profound mindfulness *during* the Lenten season, or we can seek a long-term change in our behaviors or attitudes *by the end* of the Lenten season. Either way, all of us should carefully discern what opportunities Lent holds for us this year. Let us use these 40 days wisely.