

## **1st Sunday of Lent** **March 5, 2006**

**INTRODUCTION** (Gen. 9, 8-15; I Peter 3, 18-22; Mark 1, 12-15)

We're going to hear the word "covenant" quite often in the next few Sundays. Today's first reading is about the covenant God made with Noah and his descendants which, according to the story, included all of us - the entire human race. A normal covenant would include promises two parties made to one another and expectations that the separate parties had of one another. The covenant God made with Noah is a one sided covenant in that God simply promises that he would never destroy the world by flood again, while he asks nothing of Noah in return. God gave the rainbow as a sign of his commitment to this covenant. St. Peter, in the second reading reminds us of a covenant God made with us at baptism. God would share his own life with us and our parents promised for us, or we ourselves promised if we were old enough, that we would be obedient and faithful sons and daughters of our Father, God. If we were too young to make those promises ourselves, as we grow older we have to make our own personal commitment to God if we hope to share in the blessings of God's covenant with us. One special sign God has given us to help us reaffirm our covenant with him is the Eucharist. [We have seven people from our parish who are making an important journey to enter into or to deepen their covenant with God through the Catholic Church. We are happy to have them with us. After the Prayer of the Faithful, we can send them off with our prayers to participate in the rite of election with the Archbishop this evening.]

### **HOMILY**

Perhaps you heard the story about the priest who asked his parishioner, "do you find it difficult to resist temptation?" The parishioner answered, "I don't find it difficult at all, when it comes along, I just give in to it!"

The gospel for the first Sunday of Lent is always the gospel about Jesus spending 40 days in the desert being tempted and in fasting and prayer. St. Matthew and St. Luke give us a fuller description of Jesus' temptations. St. Mark gives us a very brief version, telling us only that Satan was there to tempt him. As we can see, whenever anyone, no matter who they are, is trying to love and serve God faithfully, Satan is there to see how he can keep it from happening.

This example of Jesus' fasting and praying is put before us as an inspiration for us as we begin Lent. It's hard to imagine that someone could totally fast for 40 days, but people have done it. St. Francis did. And St. Patrick would often go to a mountain in northern Ireland and spend the 40 days of Lent fasting and praying. The Church used to require all adult Catholics to observe a moderate kind of fast during Lent, but since Vatican II that obligation has been limited to Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Many people think the Church is making it easier on us, but really the Church has made it more

challenging. Fasting has a lot to recommend it, but it might be easier than doing other things we may need to do to grow in our love for God and our love for others. For example, it might be easier to give up dessert than to be kind to some obnoxious neighbor. Or it might be easier to give up candy and soft drinks than it would be to sit down and say a rosary every day. You might say to me: "But I really need to skip dessert or to give up candy and soft drinks." That may be true, but there's nothing that says we can't do more than one thing. The Church is asking us to take a serious look at ourselves and ask ourselves how we can be free from our addictions, our lack of charity, our negative attitudes or whatever.

Lent is a holy time, but it will only be holy for us if we make it holy. As Jesus tells us in today's gospel, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand."

## **2nd Sunday of Lent March 12, 2006**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our stained glass window here in the sanctuary is an illustration of the story in our first reading of Abraham ready to sacrifice his son. Recall how God had made many promises to Abraham, promises that Abraham had to wait many years to see fulfilled. Among those promises was that he would be the father of a great nation. However, it wasn't until he and his wife Sarah were very old that his son Isaac was born. Several years after Isaac's birth, Abraham sensed God calling on him to offer up his son as a human sacrifice. Human sacrifice was not unusual at that time. Abraham loved Isaac. Just as an aside, this is the first time the word "love" appears in the bible. Besides his love for his son, Isaac was the fulfillment of all the hopes and promises God had made with Abraham. What could Abraham have thought? Did he displease God and God was canceling his promises? How could he kill his own son? But how could he disobey this God who had never let him down? I might point out a couple of interesting facts. Mt. Moriah is believed to be in Jerusalem, the very spot where King Solomon would build the Temple some 800 years later. As you know the Temple had a history of being destroyed and rebuilt a few times. The beautiful mosque called the Dome of the Rock now stands on that spot. It was built by followers of Mohammed in 690 B.C. It's the golden dome you often see when you look at a picture of Jerusalem. It is an issue over which the Jews and the Moslems are fighting today. The more conservative Jews want to tear it down and build a new temple in its place. The Moslems are determined not to let that happen.

**HOMILY:** Two mountains dominate our readings today: Mt. Moriah, the place where Abraham's faith was tested and another mountain, which was most likely Mt. Tabor, where Jesus was transfigured. I think these two mountains symbolize the ups and downs of every life. We have those times when our faith is tested, moments when we

think God is demanding too much of us, moments when it seems God is asking us to give up all the blessings he had previously given us. And we have high moments, moments when God seems so close, when his presence fills us with wonder and awe, moments of blessing that we do not want to see come to an end. Often we have no control over where God might put us at different times in our lives: whether we find ourselves on Mt. Moriah facing great trials, or we find ourselves on Mt. Tabor in a state of ecstasy. But for most of us, most of the time we're somewhere in between, plugging along every day. Difficult times often seem to last forever but they seldom do. Abraham's time of trial ended when God said "hold off, you don't have to sacrifice your son. I just want to know you were willing to obey me." Sometimes that's all God wants from us is for us to say "Thy will be done." And the joyful moments in our lives end all too quickly. The apostles wanted to stay on Mt. Tabor forever but our Lord said it was time to go back down. There was a lot of work and very hard times ahead of him.

Not mentioned is a third very important mountain. It is foreshadowed in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God did not demand the human sacrifice of Isaac, but God's only son was to remain faithful to his mission even at the cost of his life on the hill of Calvary. Calvary also casts its shadow over the glory of Mt. Tabor. St. Mark makes an obvious connection between Jesus' passion and death and his transfiguration on Mt. Tabor. Mark tells us specifically the transfiguration took place six days after Jesus' first prediction of his passion and death. And Mark ends his narration of the transfiguration with Jesus telling Peter, James and John not to tell anyone of the vision until he had risen from the dead. The obvious linking of Jesus' death and resurrection with the transfiguration tells us that while Calvary reminds us of Jesus' suffering and his cross, it is also his hour of glory that brings us salvation, hope and peace.

The transfiguration was not only a revelation of the divinity hidden in Jesus but it was also a preview of his future glorification in the resurrection. It is also a preview of the glory God the Father wants us to share with his Son. The transfiguration is the fourth of the new mysteries of light for the rosary. As I was meditating on this mystery the other day I wondered how often the apostles experienced Jesus' glory like this? Only once and it was only three of them. They had to simply go on faith the rest of the time, seeing only the human side of Jesus who ate and slept and grew tired and was sometimes sad or angry just like them. Those special moments when we experience God's special closeness, when Jesus' presence is tangible to us, when our lives are touched by glory are few and far between. Most of the time we have to simply go on faith. But it is a faith that will lead to future glory. St. Paul asks us in today's second reading: "is it possible that he who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for the sake of us all will not grant us all things besides?"

## 3rd Sunday of Lent March 19, 2006

**INTRODUCTION:** [Exodus 20, 1-17; I Cor. 1, 22-25; John 2, 13-25] Almost every Sunday during Lent this year, the first reading somehow relates to the theme of covenant. Two weeks ago we heard about God making a covenant with Noah and his descendants. In that covenant God promised he would never again destroy the world by water. Last week we heard about Abraham and the promises God made to him. Those promises were elements of God's covenant with Abraham. Today, the third Sunday of Lent, we hear about a third covenant, one that God made with his people as they were traveling through the desert on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. In that covenant God promised his people liberty, land, prosperity and he promised them they would be his special people. Today's first reading tells us what God demanded of them in return. What God demanded of his people we call "The Ten Commandments." The first three or four are a little longer than what we're used to. We, who are Christians, still recognize these commands as obligations binding upon any nation that would hope to enjoy liberty, prosperity and God's special favor.

**HOMILY:** I would like to begin with a few details about today's gospel you might find interesting. From a historical point of view, the comment about the temple being under construction for 46 years is very helpful for figuring out about when it was that Jesus drove the merchants and moneychangers out of the Temple. Since other historical sources tell us when construction of the Temple began, we can figure that this event had to have happened sometime in 27 A.D. The gospels tell us it was at Passover time. Sacrifices of oxen, calves, sheep, goats and doves were sacrifices daily, but at Passover many thousands were sacrificed. From a strictly financial perspective, it was the major business activity in Jerusalem. In St. Mark's gospel we are told Jesus would not permit people to bring things through the Temple area. Apparently the merchants must have been transporting cattle, sheep and other items from place to place, using the Temple, where people were trying to pray, as a shortcut.

We do not know for sure at what point in Jesus' career this took place. St. John places it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry while the other gospel writers place it at the end, right before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Most scholars believe St. John puts it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry because it highlights some of the themes St. John wanted to develop. It makes more sense to assume that it happened toward the end of Jesus' ministry and it's one of the things that led to his crucifixion and death.

I have already mentioned what a major industry this was. People who came from cities outside Jerusalem would not have been able to bring animals with them to offer sacrifice, so they needed to purchase them when they arrived. The law required that people purchase their sacrifice with Jewish currency. Roman coins were considered idolatrous because they were engraved with pagan inscriptions and images. Since the

Jews were under Roman occupation, they probably had to use Roman currency in their everyday lives. So when people came to Jerusalem and they wanted to buy an animal for sacrifice, they had to exchange their foreign money for Jewish currency. Thus we have the moneychangers who made their living by exchanging Roman currency for Jewish currency. One wonders how much profiteering was happening as the exchange was made.

No doubt there was a fair amount of price gouging in the sale of the animals for sacrifice. In the first three gospels, Jesus said they had turned God's house into a den of thieves. St. John didn't mention the den of thieves idea because he wanted to focus on reverence for God as was appropriate for such a holy place. This is the only time in the gospels we see Jesus act with such violence and anger.

Let us shift gears and talk about the commandments in today's first reading. Notice these weren't suggestions, they weren't options, they weren't modest proposals. The rules God made were very basic, but the way they are spoken is just as important as their content (what they should not do). Their format tells us they come from someone who is in charge. The first three commandments that stress worshipping God alone, respecting his name and keeping holy his name correspond with the gospel where Jesus was so angry about the irreverence shown to God in the Temple. What we see in both places is that we must keep God where he belongs in our lives, and where he belongs is on top.

Other than cleansing the Temple of all this business activity, honest and dishonest, there was something else Jesus did on this occasion. He made God accessible to everyone. He broke down the wall that divided Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles had been forbidden under pain of death to enter the temple and so were the blind and the lame. On this occasion Jesus quoted Isaiah "my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples." And that access would be through Jesus. He said as much when he said: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." This work of making access to God available to all people would take place especially through the death and resurrection of Jesus, an event we share in each time we come to Mass.

The commandments and the cleansing of the Temple come to us today on this third Sunday of Lent to ask us to reflect on our own relationship with God. We call him Lord. Do our lives show that we believe what we say?

## 4th Sunday of Lent March 26, 2006

**INTRODUCTION:** [2 Chronicles 36, 14-16.19-23; Eph. 2, 4-10; John 3, 14-21] Our first reading last Sunday was about the covenant God made with his people as they were traveling through the desert on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. In that covenant God promised his people liberty, land, prosperity and he promised them they would be his special people. What God demanded of his people in return was obedience to his commandments, especially the ones we call "The Ten Commandments." Our first reading this week skips over seven centuries, centuries marked with religious fervor at times, but mostly characterized by indifference to God and to his laws. This indifference took its toll on their strength as a nation and when the powerful Babylonians came against God's people around 600 B.C. they were unable to defend themselves. As a result their land was destroyed and those who managed to survive the Babylonian invasion were enslaved and deported to Babylon. Today's first reading describes this calamity and how God freed them from their Babylonian captivity almost two generations later. Their liberation from Babylon took place when the Persian king, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonians. Just to help you visualize this, Persia was the land now occupied by Iran and Babylonia was in modern day Iraq. One last thought: next week we will hear Jeremiah promise that God would make a new covenant with his people since the old one was so poorly kept. We celebrate and renew God's new covenant as always as we celebrate the Eucharist today.

**HOMILY:** One of the central elements of our relationship with God is the idea of covenant. The word "covenant" is not a word we use everyday. It is a solemn and serious agreement, but it is more than that. It is a committed relationship between two people or two groups of people. About the only time we hear the word "covenant" today is in relation to marriage. But in the Bible we hear the word a lot. Last Sunday, this Sunday and next Sunday, in our first reading, we hear passages that referred to the covenant God made with his people. The author of the first reading tells us this covenant was broken more often than it was observed. Instead of giving up on us, however, God offered us a new covenant, sealed in the blood of his Son. It's a covenant we renew and God renews with us every time we come to Mass.

God offers this new covenant to all people. As Jesus said: "God gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life." But not all people want to enter into a covenant of love with this God who sent his son. Again he tells us: "The light came into the world, but people preferred the darkness to light..."

God is our creator who knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows what is for our good, he knows what will lead us to peace and life, eternal life, but he also gave us a free will. He gave us a free will so we would be capable of returning his love. Only a

free person can love. But with our free will we can also choose not to love. And making that choice not to love our God points us in a direction that leads away from eternal life and eternal happiness.

People with a concept of "covenant" (even if they've never heard the word "covenant," but who know they are in a relationship of love with God) know a God whom we can call Father, lover, spouse, friend, protector or savior. Without a notion of "covenant" we cannot really know God in a personal way. Without a notion of "covenant" God is seen perhaps as indifferent, overly punitive or overly permissive. I think most people today, who have no notion of "covenant," see God as some kind of indulgent parent who doesn't know how to say "no" and who is so soft hearted he's going to get everyone into heaven no matter how evil they may have been. Jesus did say "God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world," but he also said that whoever does not believe in him is already condemned because they preferred darkness to light. Jesus has done all that is possible, even to the extent of dying for us, so that we can discover the light, the life, the joy that his love can bring, but he cannot force it on us if we are closed to it.

I want to say something about baptism because that's when we begin to live a new life, when we receive the light of Christ, when we enter into a covenant relationship with God. Often I have asked people when they come for the baptism of their child why they want their child baptized. The most common answer is because it washes away original sin. Those who have a deeper understanding of baptism tell me it is because baptism gives their child a sharing in Christ's life. But even that answer is incomplete. Let me draw a comparison between baptism and natural birth. When a child is born, we say they are given the gift of life (although they had already received that gift at conception). But we also know that there's a lot more to being born than simply receiving the gift of life. Natural birth is the beginning of a lengthy, complex process of growth, development, learning and maturation. So too is baptism the beginning of a process of growing in God's love, learning to recognize God as our Father, learning to obey him, worship him, love him, pray to him. That describes a loving relationship with our God that is meant to continue into eternity. One word for that relationship is "covenant." When we come to Mass each week, we come so we don't forget our covenant, that we are sharers in God's life; so we don't forget what Christ has done for us and what he asks of us in this relationship of love. We all know and God knows too how easily we forget things, so he gave us a way to remember: "Do this in memory of me." Thank you for being here today to hear once more of God's love and to express your own love in prayer and praise. Amen.