



**Contributed by Bro. John Cline, C.R.**

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## **THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT—YEAR B** **February 21, 2021**

### **GATHERING TIME** (10-15 minutes)

#### **Introduction to the Word:**

With Ash Wednesday we once again enter the season of Lent. We hear the familiar words, “Remember you are dust and unto dust you will return” or “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel”. This for me always represented a gloomy time in the church’s year, with statues covered in purple, an absence of flowers and less singing. As a youngster and more personally, it was a time of relinquishing candy or desserts and getting up earlier to go to Mass before school. It was that unpleasant period of sacrifice between the joys of Christmas and what the Easter bunny could bring. Today, it seems like Lent began long ago with the pandemic limitations. While I don’t relish deciding what to “give up” for Lent, I know it helps detach me and strengthen my will and lessen the control that something desirable has on me. I can begin with that New Year’s resolution that has slipped and add extra prayer and spiritual practices.

Lent is a time of preparation leading up to the renewal of our Baptismal promises and a recommitment to Christ. The forty days of Lent correspond to Jesus’ journey in the desert where He was tempted by the Evil One. Delores. S. Williams in *Sisters In The Wilderness* writes that, “Jesus conquered sin and death in life, not in death. In the wilderness he refused to allow evil forces to defile the balanced relationship between the material and the spiritual, between life and death, between power and the exertion of it”. This experience prepared Jesus for his adult life and mission and is a model for our mature living in reality. We all face temptations, and our Lenten journey will better prepare us as we follow Jesus.

While we find value in depriving ourselves of good things, we remember that God is the source and centre of all our choices. We can also do positive things, little services that help our brothers and sisters. We might consider the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those who are imprisoned, and burying the dead. We might also consider making a difference through the spiritual works of mercy: admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counselling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving all injuries, and praying for the living and the dead. These are, of course, practices that would do us, as well as others, well during Lent, and long after Easter.

## Warm-up Activity (about 8-10 minutes):

What is my earliest memory of Lent?

How might a sacrifice this Lent help me to know that God is the centre of my life?

What is it that I think God may be calling me to do during the Lenten season?

How might I make a difference in the human family through these contributions to others?

## The Table of the Word

Following Christ is not easy. Living Christian values is challenging. Resisting temptation is not easy. Some saints are reported to have had unique ways to resist temptation: St. Francis rolled in the snow, St. Benedict threw himself on a thorn bush, St. Bernard jumped in an icy pond. One definition for temptation that I came across was, ‘a twisted version of something good’. A skillful example of that explanation is in the many clever subtle temptation stories written by C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters*. To counter temptations, I wouldn’t recommend the above steps of some saints; rather, distancing ourselves from sources leading to temptation and filling ourselves with good things from God.

Pope Francis recommended good things to practice, and not just in Lent:

Fast from hurting words and say kind words; fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude;

Fast from anger and be filled with patience; fast from pessimism and be filled with hope;

Fast from worries and have trust in God; fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity;

Fast from pressures and be prayerful; fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy;

Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others; fast from grudges and be reconciled;

Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

Whatever Lenten practices we adopt—penance, fasting, alms giving, or service--we are purifying our minds and hearts and preparing for the Paschal feast. The choices we make help us be more intent on prayer and the works of charity, to identify more closely with Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection, and increase our love for God and neighbour. Anticipating the celebration of Easter, I am reminded, “our personal participation in the Paschal mystery begins with our conversion...but our conversion is a dynamic, life long process” (*art.1 of The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Resurrection*). This is also the call for all of us to constantly die to self in order to rise by the power of the Holy Spirit to a new life of love in Christ. It is trusting that God will freely offer what I can only receive when I stand before God, not with grasping, but with open hands. The season of Lent is really about coming to trust in God.

## Penitential Rite:

**Leader:** We come to God acknowledging our sins and trusting in God’s mercy

**Lord Jesus,** You call us to conform ourselves more closely to you,

**Christ Jesus,** You free us from slavery to sin,

**Lord Jesus,** You invite us to grow in holiness with all people,

**Lord have mercy.**

**Christ, have mercy.**

**Lord, have mercy.**

**Let us pray (together):**  
***O Lord, during these days of Lent***  
***as we prepare to walk with your Son into the desert of our lives,***  
***remind us always that you are with us, that we are never alone,***  
***that we have nothing to fear, but everything to hope for.***  
***We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

### **SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME** (45 minutes)

*(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering Word, and that God is present in the Word proclaimed. This is the Word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the Small Christian Community, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life-giving).*

#### **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.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

#### **SECOND READING** (1 Peter 3:18–22)

Beloved: 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. In former times these 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.

Baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for the 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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

#### **GOSPEL** (Mark 1:12–15)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him 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.”

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

**Lectio Divina** means “sacred reading.” It was a popular form of prayer in the early Church. This Word proclaimed today is God’s own Word, God’s way of speaking to you today through his own Spirit. So take a few moments to be quiet, allowing this Word you have just heard to touch you as you reflect quietly on the three readings. Is there a word or thought that somehow attracts you or has your interest? If so, simply identify it—no need to explain it—just identify it.

## COMMENTARY:

**First Reading:** In the Hebrew Scriptures, which tell of God’s interaction with humankind, we note how water plays a role. The great flood overcomes the evil, and the righteous are saved in the Ark. The waters of the Red Sea are parted and the Chosen People make their exodus from slavery. Moses strikes a rock and refreshing water flows. These events of cleansing water, saving water, life-giving water provided an escape or safety from the challenges of life, and a sign of God’s protection. It is interesting to note that the covenant that God makes with Noah, “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 establishes the covenant without imposing any obligations except to marvel in the gracious goodness of a God who pledges to be in relationship with all creation for all future generations. The covenant is “God’s doing,” initiated and sustained by God.

**Second Reading:** Peter references the salvation of Noah and eight persons during the flood waters, and sees that water as prefiguring Baptism. Salvation now comes without universal destruction and it comes through one person. The Righteous One suffered for the unrighteous. Christ died for all sinners, “in order to bring you to God”. We are connected to Christ and His resurrection by our baptism.

This passage from 1 Peter highlights the Paschal Mystery experienced by Jesus. Because of Jesus’ complete trust in God—even through death on a cross—God is faithful, and raises Jesus from the dead, “greatly exalting Him and bestowing on Him the name that is above every other name” (Phil 2:9). Because the name of LORD is now bestowed upon Jesus, the entire cosmos is bowing before Him and all the angelic-like beings are now bending their knees and confessing with their tongues that Jesus Christ is LORD (Phil 2:10-11). In other words, Jesus has conquered them and these cosmic forces are no longer to be feared. *They have no more power, for they are now “subject to Him” (1 Pet 3:22).*

While today we may not be afraid of “angelic-like beings”, we have our own modern fears, such as terrorism, global warming, epidemics, economic uncertainty, and the like. The cosmic implications remind us that, while these particular elements are concerns for us, ultimately we need not be afraid, because the victory over sin and death has been won through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

**Gospel:** Mark relates Jesus’ journey into the wilderness immediately following His baptism. The affirmation and commissioning Jesus experienced in baptism is tested by the temptations He encounters in the desert. Mark’s purpose in writing is to strengthen the Christian community in Rome as they had undergone a terrible persecution under the Emperor Nero in AD 66. While many followers of Jesus had remained faithful during this persecution, there were some who denied their faith. A few years later, people are afraid of another looming persecution, and they are urged to resist and be faithful.

Like the second reading this Sunday, Mark’s gospel reminds us not to be afraid, even in the midst of trials and difficulties. The Good News is that the God who made the covenant with

Noah, has taken the initiative and will faithfully bring about God's plan that we will become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). God will never bring about this plan by force or coercion, but only by call and invitation. So, the Gospel calls us to change our old ways of the enslavement to sin and to embrace the new life of the freedom to love.

(Allow about 5 – 10 minutes for the participants to react to the **Commentary** to identify a newly discovered insight or new idea.)

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Since your earliest memory/experience of Lent what, if anything, has changed?
2. (Genesis 9). *"I establish my covenant with you...."* We often think about what we are doing in our relationship with God. Lent is a time for us to think of the things that we should do: pray, fast, give alms. But perhaps it is just as important to use Lent to reflect upon what God does in God's relationship with us. It is God who initiates and sustains and, ultimately, will bring the relationship to fulfillment.  
In what ways do you think God is working in your life? What signs do you have that God is sustaining this relationship? Can you trust more in what God does than what you do?
3. (1 Peter). *"Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with Angels, Authorities, and Powers made subject to Him."* While you might not be afraid of angelic-like beings, what do you fear in your life? Do you trust that Christ has subjected all things to Himself? How might you grow in trust of Christ's victory over sin and deaths so as to live in the freedom of God's children?
4. (Mark). *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* How would you describe the Good News? What is good about the message that Jesus announces as He begins His public ministry? How might you be called to announce this Good News through your words and actions during this Lenten season?

### CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

(This time is reserved for quiet prayer as well as for an action-response to the communal reflections. The intent is to 'outreach' to the larger community. The facilitator should allow for a moderate pause between each of the numbered suggestions for reflection and action.)

1. **Word for the Week:** "Lead me in your truth and teach me" (Ps. 25:5)
2. **Suggestion for the Week:** Make a resolution to spend five minutes each evening, reflecting on the movements of your day—your highs and your lows—your 'beasts' and your 'angels'. Conclude by praying one of your favourite Psalms, or sing one of your favourite hymns.
3. **Intercessions: (Response: Lord, hear our prayer)**  
Saved by baptism and called to share Christ's victory over temptation, let us offer our intercessions to God.

**For the Church:** That these forty days in the wilderness of Lent will inspire Pope Francis, and us, to proclaim the Good News, we pray...

**May we** have world leaders who govern with integrity and honesty so that all people may live their lives in peaceful settings, we pray...

