

**Homily - 1st Sunday of Lent, Year B  
February 22, 2015 – St. Monica's**

**"Lent: God's Covenant Love ... Fast, Pray, Give!"**

**Genesis 9:8-15:** "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants, and with every living creature ... Over the Rainbow."

**Psalms 25:** "God's ways are love and truth, to those who keep covenant."

**I Peter 3:18-22:** "The Flood as prefiguration of baptism: just as many died in the waters, many are saved through the waters."

**Mark 1:12-15:** "After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness: tempted by Satan, with the wild beasts, angels attended him." The time: now! The place: here! "Repent and believe the Good News."

**NOW ... HERE ... CHANGE ...  
FAST, PRAY, GIVE!!**

This past Wednesday, hundreds of us gathered here in the church, morning and evening, to be marked with ashes. Ashes that symbolize our mortality and vulnerability; our acknowledgement of our sinful condition and dependence on God's mercy; our openness to conversion, to the inner transformation that Christ desires to work in us. We renewed our commitment to the three traditional Lenten disciplines: **fasting**, to create in our cluttered, overfull lives a space for Christ; **prayer**, to invite Christ in and cultivate with him a relationship of intimacy and friendship; and **giving**, sharing the fruits of our fasting and prayer to concretely help our brothers and sisters in need of material or spiritual assistance. So instead of "eat-pray-love", think "fast-pray-give"!

In Mark's Gospel we meet Jesus, fresh from his Baptism in the Jordan, "driven" by the Spirit into the wilderness. Unlike Matthew and Luke, who give us a blow-by-blow description of Jesus' wrestling with the temptations of pleasure, power, and possessions in the desert, Mark's version is stark. No high theological debates between Jesus and Satan about turning stones to bread, jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple, or selling your soul for fame and power. Just the barest of details: wilderness, temptation, wild animals – and in the midst of all this, the occasional consolation of the angels, of God's messengers.

Who knows what struggles Jesus himself endured, in that time in the wilderness? Although we believe that Jesus was without sin, the Gospel tells us clearly that Jesus experienced temptation. In every respect, Jesus confronted the same kind of temptations we would in a place of isolation, deprivation, and danger. Jesus had to contend not only with physical hunger, thirst and discomfort, but with all the other human limitations we might encounter in a similar situation: sadness, loneliness, paralysis, loss of hope, attachment to all that was familiar and comfortable to him.

Perhaps his biggest temptation was to doubt those precious words he had heard spoken from the cloud, just before the Spirit brought him to this empty place: "You are my Son, my beloved; in You I am well pleased." And is this not our own biggest temptation as well, in times of pain, grief, or sadness: to forget who we are, to forget the One **to whom** we belong?

For the desert is not only the place of temptation and desolation. In both Jewish and Christian spirituality, the desert is also associated with the encounter with the Divine. As an empty space is carved out in our lives, in our hearts, room is made for God to enter in, to transform us from within. Like Jesus, in the midst of the struggles and deprivations and hardships, we learn what it means to be 'waited upon by angels', strengthening our resolve to tough it out, in simple, daily fidelity to what God is enabling me to do and to become.

Mark leaves out lots of details, but he includes something crucial that Matthew and Luke omit: what happened immediately *after* this time in the wilderness. Jesus emerges from the desert neither broken and self-pitying, nor boasting of his strength and self-reliance. Jesus comes forth with a clear and compelling sense of his **mission**, the task that now awaits him: "*The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the Good News.*" This becomes the calling-card for his public ministry: a message we can sum up in three words: **NOW! HERE! CHANGE!**

Jesus comes out of the desert strengthened for his mission. Having confronted and vanquished Satan, he develops the spiritual strength he would engage against the various demons against which he would do battle in his public ministry.

Jesus emerges confirmed in his knowledge that even when hungry, empty, and lonely, he has a Father who loves him, a God whose fidelity can be counted on. Jesus bears witness to a God who is faithful – astoundingly faithful – to his **covenant**. And God would in turn renew his covenant with the world through the life and ministry of Jesus.

Throughout this Lent, we will return Sunday after Sunday to the theme of the “Covenant”. This is beautifully presented to us in today’s first reading, through the imagery of the rainbow. When we hear the story of the Flood in the book of Genesis, we can mistakenly interpret its image of God as this vengeful Old Man in the Sky, just waiting for the chance to definitively smite and rid himself of his troublesome creation. When of course, the bottom line of the story is not that God *can* destroy creation, but rather that God *promises not to*. (Link – Pastor Brent’s homily on “image of God”.) To seal this pledge, the rainbow becomes the sign of God’s covenant not only with humanity, but with all creation, with all living things.

Our God is a God of life. God desires not destruction, but salvation, human flourishing, and a world transformed. No matter what we do, no matter how unfaithful we are to our end of the bargain, God refuses to give up on us.

The readings over the next few Sundays reveal a succession of expressions of this Covenant between God and the people. God makes a covenant with the Jewish people through Abraham: a promise of land, of numerous descendants, a future full of hope. With Moses, God renews the covenant through the gift of the Torah: the Law becomes both sign and expression of Israel’s ethical and religious response to God’s covenant love. When Israel’s repeated infidelity leads to the collapse of their kingdom and political exile, God sends Prophets to announce the promise of a time when God will write the Word no longer merely on Tablets of Stone, but on the very hearts of his people.

This Covenant reaches its fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus, in whom the radically inclusive nature of God’s covenant with all of humanity becomes clearer. Inaugurated in his preaching of the Kingdom of God, in his message of forgiveness, his healings and his deeds of power, and sealed in the total self-gift embodied by his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Jesus offers us a new and eternal covenant.

This is not just something that happened two thousand years ago. This covenant needs to be renewed in us today. It can – indeed it must – become a reality for us: in our hearts, our homes, our parish communities, in the world in which we live. In the midst of our wilderness, our struggles with darkness, and violence, and death, Jesus’ promise is that the final word will always belong to light, peace, life, and love. When we truly believe this – not just intellectually, but with the knowledge of the heart, then Lent becomes more than this quaint, somewhat weird Catholic preoccupation with penance and self-denial. (Link: our call to participate in the conversation on the issues confronting marriage and family life, in preparation for the Oct 2015 Synod.)

Although we are in Lent, we always remain an Easter people. In our struggles, God is with us, even though we do not always see or feel his presence. We can’t go looking for rainbows; but every so often, a rainbow finds us, appears where we least expect it to, and fills us with wonder and awe. May our Lenten journey ... one in which we are encouraged **to fast, pray, and give** ... foster within us a deeper trust in God’s covenant love, and a willingness to respond to Jesus’ invitation to conversion and change. Not somewhere else, but here; not later, but now. Then as we walk through the storms of life, our eyes will be opened to those special manifestations of God’s rainbow: a delicate, but sure reminder that we are not alone, that our God walks with us – right here, right now – leading us from death into life.

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Many of you know that I am a film buff. Like many of you, I expect to be watching the Academy Awards on TV this (tomorrow) evening. One of the great moments in film history comes at the beginning of the 1939 classic *The Wizard of Oz*, when dreaming of new possibilities just beyond the horizon of her sheltered Kansas life, Judy Garland as Dorothy sings “Over the Rainbow”.

**Somewhere Over the Rainbow"**  
music by Harold Arlen and lyrics by E.Y. Harburg

*Somewhere over the rainbow  
Way up high,  
There's a land that I heard of  
Once in a lullaby.*

*Skies are blue, And the dreams that  
you dare to dream  
Really do come true.*

*Somewhere over the rainbow*

*Someday I'll wish upon a star  
And wake up where the clouds are far  
Behind me.*

*Where troubles melt like lemon drops  
Away above the chimney tops  
That's where you'll find me.*

*Somewhere over the rainbow  
Bluebirds fly.  
Birds fly over the rainbow.  
Why then, oh why can't I?*

*If happy little bluebirds fly  
Beyond the rainbow  
Why, oh why can't I?*