

Sermon for 1 Lent, Year B
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
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So here we are, four days into Lent. Five, if you count today, which is technically a feast in the midst of our Lenten fast. We stand, gaping, at the yawning abyss of a whole six weeks before Easter. How in the world are we going to get through it?

On Wednesday, we put on ashes as the sign of repentance and sorrow for our sin. And if we have taken all that seriously, then we have had several days now of fasting or some other discipline. And the danger in Lent is now rearing its ugly head. Self-absorption. It is imperative that we should understand the depth of our own depravity. Without that, we cannot reach the point of giving in to God's plan for our lives. But in the process of remembering our sins, we can get so focused on ourselves, that we once again forget that we are not the center of the universe. The means become the end, and we are right back where we started.

St. Peter reminds us in our Epistle reading that our focus must always be Jesus Christ. It is Christ who "died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God". We are the sinners. We are the unrighteous. But Jesus is the one who has taken care of all that. He is righteous, and yet suffered willingly for our unrighteousness. And there is no glory, laud, honor, authority or power of which he is not worthy. It is he "who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him."

As important as the Cross of Christ is, though, there is more to praise him for. His suffering for us begins before that last consummation in the very act of Incarnation. God the Son, the eternal Word, restricted himself out of love to become one of us, to take on all of our frailties and temptations. And to overcome them in himself, offering himself as the way to overcome them in us.

Our Gospel reading goes back to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He submits to the baptism of his cousin John, and he has this ecstatic experience of recognition, where the Father speaks his pleasure over him and the Holy Spirit descends upon him. And then he immediately has Lent. The Spirit drives him out into the desert for forty days of temptation. He must face everything that the devil can throw at him, and he does, for us.

But the story of God's faithfulness to his creatures begins long before Jesus was driven into the desert, long before the Incarnation, long before the nation of Israel, even long before the calling of Abraham. St. Peter refers us back to the time of Noah when God destroyed everyone but eight people in the Flood. Way back then, people wouldn't listen to God. The only one who listened and trusted that God meant what he said was Noah. And since Dad had already ruined the family name by building this huge monstrosity in the back yard, his sons figured they may as well get in the boat with him, as they had nothing to lose. But the rest of the people were so wicked that God had to destroy them before they got even worse.

We all know the story of the rainbow, how God promises never to destroy everything by a flood again. But stop and think about what God is doing here. When he puts his bow in the clouds, he is laying down a weapon. God is symbolically disarming himself. He is giving up some of his power, as a token of his good will toward his creatures. And he does this in order to establish a relationship. He doesn't want his creatures to simply fear him as a capricious tyrant. He wants them to relate to him as a loving father.

Does any of this sound familiar? God restricts himself in order to return his people to the proper relationship with himself. It started all the way back at the beginning of the story, this "righteous for the unrighteous" stuff. Jesus Christ's Incarnation and Passion is simply the culmination of God's plan, which he has carried out doggedly from the very moment of the Fall, and perhaps before.

And now, just as Noah and his family were carried safe through the water, so are we. In our baptism, we offer ourselves up to God, while the evil that is in us is judged and drowned in the water. But in submitting to the judgment of our sin and identifying ourselves with Jesus, in his baptism and on his cross, we can participate in his resurrection and receive a clean conscience from God. We come through the water into the body of Christ, which is the only safe place to weather the storm of this age. That's why the place you are sitting is called the nave, from the Latin *navis*, ship. And that's why the ceiling of the nave is traditionally constructed as if it were the upside down keel of a *navis*. This is the place where people flee in obedience to God, so that he can keep them safe from his judgment.

But that's not all. What about all those people who died in the Flood, thousands of years before Jesus was born? St. Peter tells us that when Jesus died in the flesh, he went in spirit to preach to the spirits of those people. Even after he had to drown them out, even after thousands of years, God cares about them and desires to save them. Genesis tells us that the Lord was sorry he had created these people. And yet, he still wants what is good for them. In fact, it appears that even drowning them was a step in God's plan to save them by way of the Cross.

This is an amazing God. This is a God who is worthy of our attention, love, and obedience. We must listen to him and focus on him. As we identify with Jesus' fast in the desert and face up to our own temptations, we should have the same attitude as David in Psalm 25: "Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long." All seven verses that we sang this morning are about God, not about David. "Gracious and upright is the Lord..." "He guides the humble in doing right..." "All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness..." Even when he asks God not to remember his sins, it is "for the sake of *your* goodness, O Lord."

David's awareness of his sin is all in the context of the great and marvelous goodness of God. And it is only in that context that he dares to approach the Almighty with his own problems and issues. This is the proper focus for our Lenten discipline, and I hope it will train us to continue in that attitude at other times. In verse 14, David says, "My eyes are ever looking to the Lord, for he shall pluck my feet out of the net." May our eyes also be ever looking to the Lord, for he has saved us, and is saving us, and will save us, far more thoroughly than we can ask or imagine.