

Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-9, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15, February 21, 2021

I want to share some scripture passages with you this morning. The first is from the 7th chapter of Genesis. *Then the Lord said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household. For I see that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights. And every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.' And Noah did all that the Lord commanded him.*

From the book of Numbers: *And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel. And he made them wander in the wilderness for 40 years until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord had disappeared."*

The book of 1 Kings Chapter 19: *The angel of the Lord came a second time to Elijah and touched him and said, "Get up and eat. Otherwise, the journey will be too much for you." He got up and ate and drank and he went on the strength of that food 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the Mount of God. At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there."*

And then finally from our gospel lesson this morning:

The Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness 40 days tempted by Satan.

He was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him.

You might have noticed the connection between those passages. Each of them refers to a period of 40 days or, in the case of the Israelites, 40 years, a period that was especially important in their history, especially important in the development of their faith. This 40 day or 40-year period has been important to people of faith for many centuries. We, as Christians today, and in many other Christian congregations, began last Wednesday a 40-day journey through the season we call Lent. It's been a Christian tradition for centuries and you can see from those scriptures that the 40-day Lenten period finds at least some basis in those 40 day and 40-year periods of preparation, of reprisal, of whatever it was the Lord had in mind for the people in those passages during those 40 day and 40 year periods.

For us, Lent is a wonderful opportunity. Lent is an opportunity for us to relive the experiences of those who were also brought closer to God because of the experiences they had through those 40 days or 40 years.

It is an opportunity for us to live those life changing and faith strengthening experiences that they had. The end of our 40-day journey ends on Easter morning.

And Lent is an opportunity for us to relive those experiences that allow us to arrive at Easter day renewed in life and strengthened in faith.

If you watch the news these days, if you read the paper, if you see what's happening on television and in the media, you could get the impression that we live in a wicked world. Maybe not as wicked as the time of Noah, maybe worse than the time of Noah. We do not know how bad that time was. But we can get the impression that we are surrounded by so much bad we wonder where the good is. And while certainly none of us can be described as righteous in the sense of Noah and his family, as Christians trying to live a Christian life we can sometimes feel very out of place in this world.

There are those days when it seems like violence and terrorism are raining down all around us. When depravity and bad news flood the press, wouldn't it be nice if we could somehow just start over with a fresh start, a new beginning, in a world that is washed clean by the waters of God. That is the opportunity that Noah had. Those 40 days and 40 nights of rain washed the earth clean of the evil that had run rampant. Noah and his family were saved to start over again with a fresh start and a new beginning.

Well, it's not up to us to call down the rains of God to wash away the evil on the earth, and it's a good thing too, because we might be the first ones to get washed away! We need to be careful in our judgment of others. But we do have an opportunity during Lent to change the way we see the world. Whenever you read the newspaper, whenever you watch TV, don't get stuck on the bad stuff. Whenever you read about the wars and terrorism, pray for those people who need to have a change of heart. Pray for a peaceful resolution to the conflicts that are going on in the world. We can't just shake our heads and walk away saying, "Oh, it's terrible." Take time - especially during this Lenten season - to be intentional about praying for those who are in danger. Pray fervently and faithfully for peaceful resolutions.

Prayer, meditation, time with God; those Lenten disciplines give us opportunity to seek ways to share the love of God with this world that needs it so badly.

Lent is a time of repentance, reconciliation and renewal. But we need to be intentional about it. We can't wash the world clean with a flood, but we can pray for the change that is possible with God.

Sometimes it might seem that we are wandering aimlessly through life.

There are those days when we are not sure where we're headed or what's in store, much like the Israelites wandering through the wilderness. God took them out of the land of Egypt. He promised he was taking them somewhere, but they didn't know where they were going or when they would get there. We sometimes face that same kind of feeling.

Where is my life headed? What am I supposed to do? What does God have in store for me? Again, we have the 40 days of Lent as a time to be intentional about seeking guidance. Spend time in scripture reading; spend time in prayer, meditation, conversation with faithful family and friends trying to discern the path that God has laid out for you. The Lenten season is a perfect time for that. Make it a discipline - try and find the map that God has to show you where your own Promised Land is and then intentionally head that way.

Sometimes we might feel like we're running for our lives. That's what happened to Elijah. Elijah was running for his life. People were out to kill him. He was looking for a place to hide. The Lord sent him food that lasted 40 days and 40 nights, till he was able to find a cave in which to escape. And when he got to that cave, he sought the presence of God.

There was an earthquake, there was a whirlwind and God was in neither of those. God was in a still small voice that spoke to Elijah and led him out of the cave and into his life of prophesy and doing God's work.

When you feel like you're running for your life, maybe you need to find a cave for just a while. During Lent, set aside a little time each day to find a place where you can hide. It may not be a lot of time, but spend some time there listening to that still, small voice. Get away from the whirlwind, get away from the earthquake. Listen for God and that voice that can lead you out of the cave and on to the rest of your life.

For Christians, Lent is not just 40 days on the calendar. It's not just another season of the church year- it's a journey. A journey that takes us from Ash Wednesday to the cross. It takes us from where we are to a better place - a new place - a place where we end up renewed in life and strengthened in faith. Sometimes that journey from wherever we are to wherever we're headed, from this place to that better place, seems awfully long and terribly hard.

There are days when we think we might not make it. There are signs along the way that say, "You're too far gone for repentance." There are signs that say, "You're beyond reconciliation." When we have those days, when we see those signs, we need to remember the most important 40

days in the history of the world - the 40-day battle between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan - 40 days! And you know what, Satan lost. Jesus won the battle in the wilderness and we share in his victory.

The battle Jesus fought with Satan taught us two things. First it taught us that Satan's power is real, and if you're alive and breathing you know that Satan's power is real. It's after us every day. But Jesus' victory also teaches us that Satan's power is limited. The power of God, the power of Jesus Christ to overcome sin and death is even greater than the power of Satan.

When he comes tempting us and testing us, we need to rely on God's power and say, "You know what Satan, you might win a few battles with me, but Jesus already won the war." And that's the victory we share.

The battle between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness was just the start of the great struggle between good and evil- the struggle that God won through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is what we rely on. Not our own strength, not our own ability to get through those days in the wilderness, we turn to God.

During Lent we practice those Lenten disciplines we talk about that draw us closer to God so that we can share in the victory. When Satan tries to tempt us, we are not driven into the wilderness away from God. We are driven closer to the one on whom we depend - God the Father. You see, while Jesus was in the wilderness with the wild beasts threatening on one side, the angels cared for him on the other side. For us, it is as if God is saying, "the wild beasts could get ya. But I'm over here taking care of you. When you move closer to me the wild beasts can't harm you." That is the battle Jesus won in the wilderness during those 40 days.

Lent is a season of repentance. It is 40 days of reconciliation - a 40-day journey. By God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ we end that journey on Easter morning, renewed in life and strengthened in faith.

Amen