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### [Scripture for Life](#)



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When we were teenagers, my brother and I spent a lot of time playing the guitar and singing the folk songs of the day. Our parents loved our singing, but Mom couldn't bear to hear us sing songs about war, especially the laments over the dead or soldiers who came home maimed. We weren't allowed to sing them in her presence. When Mom heard of someone who had died in Viet Nam, she would visibly choke up for a moment and then quietly say something like "God be with his poor wife and children."

Mom was a young wife with an infant boy on the day she saw her husband go off to World War II. Every day from the time Dad left until the moment she saw him get off the train in Denver in 1945, she prayed, worried and lived with a hole in her heart. Anytime she heard of others living through the same thing, she got tears in her eyes. She really did share their pain. That is what compassion means.

In today's psalm, we pray to learn God's ways. We sing of God's compassion and mercy, of God's love and goodness. Then, we blithely ask to share those. As Jesus warned James and John, we may not know what we are asking.

When we ask God, "Teach me your paths," we are opening ourselves to existential knowledge of divine compassion. That is a highfalutin way of saying we want to understand God's ways in our flesh — in our heart and guts as well as in our minds. We want to be moved by the same loving identification with others that moves God's saving love for us. We are offering ourselves to cry God's tears which, like everything else divine, are without measure. Of course, the other side of it is that we are also asking to rejoice with God's own joy.

Today's Gospel gives us two segments in one Gospel reading, both of them short. First, we hear that the Spirit compelled Jesus to go to the desert where he struggled with everything that it means to be human. How was Jesus tested? Mark only tells us that he found himself between the Spirit and Satan, between the wild beasts and the angels.

C. S. Lewis may have been thinking of Jesus' test when he wrote in *The Screwtape Letters* that human beings are "amphibians — half spirit and half animal." Lewis said that we belong to both time and eternity, and that finding our balance in those two dimensions, learning how to be embodied spirits, or divinely-inspired persons of flesh and blood, is the goal of human life. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis portrays a tutor devil, Screwtape, instructing his neophyte nephew demon about how to waylay human beings from their core vocation as images of God. He told his nephew that the task is to get them to fixate on just one or the other of the dimensions of their nature, the spirit or the flesh. According

to Screwtape, body-denying attempts at holiness are as much a betrayal of the human vocation as is licentiousness with no regard for the human spirit. Both deny true humanity and bring misery in their wake. Jesus' desert test seems to have entailed precisely that core human struggle. Jesus was grappling with how to be a true Son of God, a person of flesh and blood, consciously and willingly inhabited by God.

In the second, but intimately connected Gospel that we hear today, Jesus emerged from the desert with his own answer to the human dilemma. He called it the Gospel, or the good news of God. That Gospel was Jesus' awareness that the reign of God was at hand precisely because God was at hand. Jesus took what Israel had ever dreamed of, God's dwelling among humankind, and proclaimed that it was a reality that everyone could experience if only they were open to it. The reign of God that Jesus proclaimed is a spiritual reality that exists in time and space. It is the truly human way of living, being willingly loved and loving inspired creatures.

The offer Jesus made to people was really very simple — and life changing: “Repent and believe.” What that really meant was “Take on a new perspective! Believe what I am saying about God and about humanity!” Jesus, the Son of God, understood God's love for humanity and all of what human beings were capable. He saw that his mission was to make God's love present and to share his status as God's Son with all of humanity. He knew it was possible, and he also knew that it would come at the cost of true compassion. Those who accept Jesus' offer will cry with God's own tears of sorrow and of joy.

## GENESIS 9:8-15

In the book *Preaching the New Lectionary*, Dianne Bergant points out that the Sunday readings from the Hebrew Scriptures in this Lenten liturgical cycle reflect on the covenants God has offered humankind through the ages. We begin with the first: the surprising covenant promise God made to Noah.

Covenant is the deepest and most unique concept in the Hebrew religious tradition. As Scripture presents it, a covenant is a free promise on God's part. God's covenant offer is unilateral, it does not depend on humanity's response. God has chosen Israel and will not repent — no matter what. Israel does nothing to deserve this promise. The chosen people are simply that, chosen by God for God's sovereign motives. Anytime we think of ourselves as a part of God's chosen people, that very thought should bring us to our knees in gratitude for the gift we could never deserve. As we move through the Sundays of Lent, we reflect on God's covenants and Israel's growing understanding of God's promise and offer to them. We also ask what they say to us today.

We begin with the covenant God made with all the survivors of the Great Flood in the days of Noah. Walter Bruggemann comments that we should not regard the story of the flood as a myth in the sense of its being a culture's attempt to understand life and natural phenomena. He says it is revelation “about the God of Israel and his peculiar way in transforming the world” (*Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*). According to Bruggemann, the covenant God makes with Noah, his family and the creatures, is God's promise that divine wrath will never destroy creation as a result of human sin. That doesn't mean that human sinfulness will not bring chaos to the world — even on a cosmic scale. Humanity is daily becoming more capable of that. The covenant, the promise God gave Noah, is that God will not destroy creation, that there is no one-to-one correspondence between human evil and divine punishment.

The symbol of God's promise is the rainbow, a visible sign that the ancients read as God's weapon that had been put aside. It is the sign that God will never be humanity's adversary. Like the unilateral covenant, the sign is in the heavens, it has nothing to do with reciprocity but is a promise of compassion and mercy, pure and simple.

## PSALMS 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

In Psalm 25 we pray, “Remember that your compassion ... and your love are from of old. ... Remember me.” The essence of the covenant God established at the time of Noah was just that, eternal compassion. God said “Never again!” Never will God repay humankind what our wickedness earns. When we ask God to remember that, we are really telling ourselves to remember it. We may also be asking for the eyes to see God's goodness at work in our lives and the lives of those around us.

The essence of this psalm, at least for this First Sunday of Lent, is the first verse: “Your ways, O Lord, make known to me; teach me your paths, guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.” One of the greatest challenges we could take up in Lent would be to make that verse the theme of these 40 days. Doing so will lead us to end our Lenten journey humbler and more joyful than when we started.

When we pray “Make your ways known, teach me your paths,” we are admitting that we really do not know God’s ways. If we did, we would choose them consistently, and the world would be a much better place for all. No one who is sane deliberately chooses what is evil or harmful. We always choose to do, to say or to obtain something we see as good, something we think we will enjoy, that will make us happy or help us move toward our goals. The trouble is that our vision of happiness may be unbalanced and the goals we choose are too often narrow or egocentric. We tend to choose based on a flimsy version of the good, as if we were all that matters. It is all too easy to ignore the good of the people and world around us and to see the possessions or status we desire as that which will give meaning to life. That is why the prayer “You are God my savior” should challenge us to the very core.

When we sincerely pray to know God’s ways, we are praying for a conversion that will turn us from a focus on ourselves toward sharing God’s great love for every living creature. We are asking to share in the divine compassion. Being open to that will be very costly, yet will give us a rich life.

## **1 PETER 3:18-22**

British theologian James Alison writes about the mystery of Christ and salvation in a way that turns some common thinking about God on its head. Alison is sometimes difficult to understand because his perspective is so different from what many of us have heard about Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross. We have heard that the cross is the way of making up to God for sin. The alternative approach perceives Jesus’ sacrifice as God’s expression of undying, unstoppable love.

Today’s selection from the First Letter of Peter says, “Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God.” Many of us will hear that as an affirmation that Christ had to suffer to atone for our sinfulness, to pay the price or take the punishment we deserve so that we would be free to approach God. The inside-out way of understanding that is to perceive that Christ embodied God’s original offer of forgiveness to humankind. The first approach understands that God created everything in perfection and when we blew it, God sent the divine son to make up for our failure.

Another perspective perceives that God created everything with a destiny of growth toward union with God and we have to learn that with as much difficulty and as many falls and mistakes as we make in learning to walk and talk. In the first perspective, Christ’s cross brings God’s forgiveness for sin. In the second, the cross is the fullest possible revelation of God’s desire to be one with us; Christ’s free acceptance of the cross demonstrates that even the ultimate attempt to reject God cannot overcome God’s compassion and saving will.

## **MARK 1:12-15**

Today we hear the shortest of the three Gospel accounts of Jesus’ 40-day sojourn in the desert. Gone are the three temptations, the travels and the dialogue with the devil. Stark Mark gives us the simplest, bare bones account — one in which every word counts.

Mark tells us that the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the desert. The Spirit who descended upon him at baptism dwells in him and moves him. The 40 days recall the Israelites’ 40 years in the desert, the 40 days Moses spent fasting and repenting for the sin of Israel and Elijah’s 40-day walk to Mt. Horeb where he would meet God in the gentle breeze (Deuteronomy 9:18, Exodus 34:27-29, 1 Kings, 19: 8-13, respectively). The desert also connects Jesus to John the Baptist’s ministry. John was the voice crying in the desert; Jesus passed time in the desert, but then went back to the towns and villages, and eventually to Jerusalem.

The desert is a place of testing where all the usual signs of God’s presence are absent; it is where a person must seek God in the midst of adversity rather than blessing. There are four “powers” present in this story with Jesus: the Spirit who drove him there, Satan who put him to the test, the wild beasts who threatened him, and the angels who ministered to him.

It is as if heaven and earth hung in the balance as the forces of evil and natural danger clashed with the Spirit and God's comforting angels.

This test sets Jesus on his path of being the living sign of God's love even to the point of accepting his passion and death. Mark won't leave us sitting simply with the story of the desert. He demonstrates Jesus' victory, his answer to the test in the fact that he comes and immediately begins his preaching, his public ministry.

Mark moves us into Jesus' ministry with the ominous introduction: "After John had been arrested." A more precise translation of that last word is "handed over." John was Jesus' precursor, and his arrest and martyrdom recall Isaiah's Servant of God (Isaiah 52). This is a sign of what Jesus can expect. Just when John's ministry comes to its violent conclusion, Jesus begins his own which will come to a similar climax.

Now, for the first time, we hear Jesus' voice. He makes four brief statements, two descriptive and two imperative. In the moment of terrible crisis, just as someone he respected has been taken by the Roman authorities, Jesus speaks his first words: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand." The time (kairos) refers not to a clock hour or calendar day, but to time as the convergence of grace and nature, everything is prepared and ready for the fulfillment of the promises God has made since the time of creation.

Jesus' shorthand description of everything he means by that kairos of fulfillment is "the kingdom of God is at hand." The rest of the Gospel will fill out the meaning of that phrase. In short, God's reign is becoming present in the person and mission of Jesus. God is entering human history as never before.

This kairos demands a response, and Jesus describes that response with his two imperatives. First, "repent." As we know, that is not a call to sorrow, but to joy. "Repent" (metanoeo) might be likened to an invitation to come to our senses, to appreciate what life is really about. It is an invitation to perceive all of existence from a different perspective, a vantage point that notes God's nearness.

The second imperative is "Believe in the Gospel." Believe that God is good and has chosen to be with you in this time and place. Believe in God's compassion so much that you receive it and share it. Then you will know that the reign of God is indeed near.

## **Planning: 1st Sunday of Lent**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

first readings for Lent in Cycle B focus our attention on covenants with God. This week we hear about God's covenant with Noah after the flood. Next Sunday we will hear of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The Third Sunday of Lent brings us the terms of the covenant God made with Moses after the Exodus. The first reading for the Fourth Sunday of Lent sees the destruction of Jerusalem and the Israelites' exile as a result of unfaithfulness to the covenant.

Of course, this theme will only last for the first two Sundays if you have catechumens ready for the final stage of their preparation for the Easter sacraments. In that case, the readings for the Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays of Lent will come from Cycle A, at least at whatever Masses you celebrate the scrutinies.

If you have such catechumens in your faith community, this First Sunday of Lent is the day to celebrate the Rite of Sending of the Catechumens for Election. This rite, an optional rite for the United States, helps to link the whole parish with the celebration of the Rite of Election with the bishop, commonly celebrated at the cathedral and/or a centrally located parish later in the day. The rubrics and texts for the Rite of Sending are found in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, beginning at #106.

One of the major deficits in the implementation of the RCIA in many parishes is the lack of involvement of the whole parish in the journey of the candidates. If your parish has involved the whole community throughout the process, then this

rite offers an opportunity for the parish to share in this key moment in the catechumen's journey of faith. If you haven't adequately involved the community throughout the whole process, it's still important to do so during Lent.

Remember that Lent developed in conjunction with these final days of the catechumenate in ancient times. The whole community joined with the "elect" (as catechumens who have been called to the sacraments by the bishop are now called) to deepen their own conversion, so that they could richly celebrate the renewal of their own baptism at Easter. The journey of the elect and the Lenten journey of the already baptized merge into a shared experience of repentance and renewal.

Even if you don't have any catechumens in your own parish, try to find ways to help parishioners link their Lenten practices with the elect's spiritual journey. Can you gather names of the elect in neighboring parishes and pray for them throughout Lent? Might your parishioners write short letters to those preparing for the Easter sacraments, offering their prayers and support?

## Prayers: 1st Sunday of Lent

By: Joan DeMerchant

### Introduction

Lent is a time to remember that God first reached out to us. This was not a meagre, one-time gesture like those we often make and withdraw, but a profound, lasting and healing covenant. During this season, we reflect on and ask forgiveness for our own alienating, sinful actions. We ponder in deep prayer and silence that God has invested everything, including a beloved Son, into this relationship.

### Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, your ministry was preceded by 40 days in the desert: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you, like your ancestors, prayed and were tempted: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us into this Lenten time of prayer and repentance: Lord, have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us now pray to grow in our relationship with God and one another during this sacred time.

**Minister** For the whole church: that our covenant with a loving God may be strengthened during this Lenten season ... remembering your constant love, we pray,

- For the courage to contribute to a more just and peaceful world during this Lenten season ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For the desire to build more loving relationships with others, especially those we resent, during this Lenten season ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For the generosity of time and effort to assist those seeking to enter the church during this Lenten season ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For the catechumens in our faith community and throughout the diocese who will be participating in the Rite of Election with our bishop ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For the compassion to walk with the sick and dying, the grieving and most needy members of this community during this Lenten season ... remembering your constant love, we pray,

**Presider** God of patience, we are humbled by the unconditional love you have bestowed on us beyond our memory. Help us to observe this holy season in prayer and repentance, so that we may be ever more faithful to you and to one another.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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