

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 1ST. SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 9: 8-15 Psalm 25 I Peter 3: 18-22 Mark 1: 12-15

Dear Preachers:

On the first night of a parish retreat I noticed the arrival of a group of about eight young adults; one couple had an infant in arms. With them were some older members of the parish, the “stalwarts.” I was struck by the energy of the group, their enthusiasm and involvement in our prayer service and the obvious bonds among them—maybe not so much of friendship, but community. I saw them after the service, introduced myself and asked if they were neighbors, co-workers or a special group in the parish. One young woman responded, “We’re the catechumens.” That brief response explained a lot; their enthusiasm, sense of community and a shared weekday-night prayer service. I wished their enthusiasm would rub off on the rest of us “cradle Catholics.”

That group of catechumens comes to mind this Sunday, the first Sunday in Lent. They remind us and call us to enter more fully into our Lenten journey. Of course, Lent is about the catechumens preparing for baptism. But it is also about those of us who have been around for a while and have gotten into a rut or have tried a few diversionary paths. This new season is a chance for us to be refreshed in faith; an opportunity to think about the renewal of our baptismal commitment we will profess at Easter. We fix our eyes on that coming moment of personal and communal renewal and during Lent we do what we can to make that renewal one of total commitment; a moment when we do our best to make one big “Yes” to the life of the Spirit of Jesus within us. This Lent we pray for the enthusiasm of those catechumens and ask for a sense of rediscovery in our faith, as if we were entering it for the first time.

We might pray for a refreshed faith in the God of the Genesis passage. The story tells of God’s covenant with Noah. It takes place right after the Flood. The writer is tracing the covenant between God and Israel but notice that “every living creature” is included. God is the God of all creation and despite any future sin on our part, will not go back on the covenant God has made with us. The passage has the famous story of the rainbow. The rainbow is not to serve as a reminder to us of God’s covenant; but it is a sign to God “to recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings....” No matter how far adrift we go; no matter that we might forget God, the author of Genesis says God will never forget

us. This first Sunday of Lent begins with a strong reminder that God has bound God's self to an everlasting relationship with us and will never let go. Such a lover-God is a strong attraction to us this Lent. We have nothing to fear from this God as we turn away from other gods of modern life and return to the everlasting God who has made a covenant with "every living creature."

The first Sunday of Lent always begins with Jesus' temptation in the desert. Each of the synoptic gospels has its own take on the story. This year we have Mark's. It is brief and leaves out the details told by Matthew and Luke. The preacher should avoid the temptation to "fill in the blanks" by going to the other gospel accounts. We need to respect Mark's narrative and listen to what it has to say to us as we begin our Lenten desert journey.

Mark almost dismisses Jesus' temptation. He covers it in a terse line, "The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him." That's it! We are reminded of what John the Baptist said just a few verses earlier. He promised, "After me will come one more powerful than I...." Well, Mark's temptation account certainly shows how powerful Jesus is. As we enter this Lent we may feel our own resolve to change is wishy-washy. It's another Lent, perhaps we are thinking, "here we go again." We lack the catechumens' enthusiasm; we have been around the block more than a few times! How do we make this Lent a fresh experience? How do we gather the spiritual desire and energy to change? How will we even know the areas in us where change is necessary?

After John spoke about the "one more powerful than I," John said, "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." There's the source of our renewal; there's the One who can fill us with the desire to change and make that change possible. Jesus will baptize us anew with his Spirit this Lent to make our wizened spirits new again. Lent is truly a season of hope in which we discover that what is impossible for us, is possible for God.

In the desert Israel was tested and gave into temptation. Just as Israel spent forty years in the desert, now Jesus spends forty days. Like Israel he is tempted there, but he does not give in. Mark tells us that there were wild beasts with Jesus in the desert. For other humans that would be a scary place to be; but in Jesus, God is reconciling humans and nature. The desert loses its hostile qualities; with Jesus

there it is a peaceable kingdom--- the messiah has reconciled humans and “wild beasts.” Lent provides an opportunity to confront the “wild beasts” of our lives. Think here of the aggression, competition, unsatiable desires that have control over us and our nation. They are wild beasts, untamable. But they do not have to have dominion over us, for we have been baptized into Jesus, the powerful One, who overcomes the tests in the desert and makes peace between opposing forces. We are also told that in this place of testing and hostile forces, there were also ministering “angels.”

We pass through many periods of testing in our lives, times when our very identity as Christians is seriously challenged. Powerful but subtle forces pull at us and we can feel solitary in our struggle against them. But there are “angels” ministering to us in the deserts of our lives: when an addiction seem impossible to break and we find help in a group; when we are distraught over the death of a loved one and other widowed friends share their stories and give us courage; when we are laid up in bed with a broken leg or bad back and friends come by to relieve the loneliness; when our faith is dry and we go to church wondering why we bother and the prayer and faith of other worshipers give us hope; when we want to be a peacemaker, live a simpler life, or choose the path of service and we hear nothing but the voices of naysayers. Then the lives of the saints and stories of contemporary Christians are our “angels” in the wilderness, ministering to us, enabling us to be faithful to the call we hear and are trying to live out. Other “angels” may not be as tangible but nevertheless minister to us in the desert. Our ideals and dreams, (our “angels”?) if we stay with them, may lift us up, sustain us through difficult and testing times in our lives.

Deserts---what are they for us? The hard testing times when we wander and wonder? Are they the anxiety of losing a job and wondering where God is? Are they the temptations to compromise our ideals? Should we go back on a promise made? Should we cut corners in our lives and live with less integrity? In the desert of the Jews, as they faced temptations and even betrayed God, God stayed with them and lead them out. Genesis reminds us that God sees the sign, the rainbow, and stays faithful to the covenant God made with all living beings. God makes sure that we do not have to pass through our deserts alone and visits us in various “angelic” ways.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER
WOMEN IN SCRIPTURE: A DICTIONARY OF NAME AND UNNAMED
WOMEN IN THE HEBREW BIBLE, THE
APOCRYPHAL/DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS AND THE NEW
TESTAMENT. Carol Meyers (ed.) Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans
Publishing Co., 2000. Paper \$30, 592 pages. ISBN 0-8028-4962-8

The long title pretty well describes this book. The book shows what some more traditional commentaries neglect, the influence of women in biblical times. There are very good introductory essays on the Hebrew, Apocryphal and New Testament texts with special emphasis on how they pertain to women. Also included is an essay on feminist biblical scholarship.

QUOTABLE

The plain fact is that when the Bible is read out well it creates an immediate interest in its contents. When it is read out in pedestrian fashion, not to say badly, no one cares what it says. Preachers who have been preceded by good readers create an immediate tension when they address none of the obvious questions posed by the readings: the who, what, when, why and where of it. Conversely, preachers can be regularly thwarted if their carefully prepared homilies are on texts that cannot even be heard by the assembly because they are read so poorly.”

----Gerard S. Sloyan in , WORSHIPFUL PREACHING, page 41-2.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NOTES

In light of the statement by U.S. Catholic Bishops (June 15, 2001) on global warming and their call to “exercise stewardship,” in our use of natural resources, during these next weeks I will be sharing with you recommendations for how we can help the environment. Some are simple, some will require a long-term commitment. (I found these on the bulletin board of a retreat house; sorry, I do not know the original source.) We preachers need to recall the goodness of creation for our hearers and challenge them, and ourselves, to tend to what God has placed in our hands.

--Encourage the U.S. government to support international efforts to combat the threat of global warming.

--Support efforts to preserve natural habitats in the United States.

--Encourage the United States to play a strong international role in researching and preserving biodiversity worldwide.

- When purchasing a car, select an energy efficient model.
- Conduct an energy audit of your church and identify ways to reduce energy use.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Ernest P. Mc Carver # 0264009 (On death row since 9/23/92)

- Carl Moseley # 0294214 (10/1/92)
- John L. Conway # 0084604 (10/19/92)
- Johnnie L. Spruill #0385535 (11/4/92)

---- Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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