

Journey through Lent

First Sunday of Lent • February 21, 2021

Opening Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others even if it has been a hectic day.

Leader: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Leader: God, bless our journey throughout this Lent.

All: God, be with us as we travel.

Leader: May our Lenten fasting provide a hunger for justice,

All: Our alms a making of peace,

Leader: Let our prayer be the chant of humble and grateful hearts.

All: Amen.

Insights on the Readings

Rotate around the circle, having each person read a paragraph/bullet point aloud. For each reading, begin with the bullet points and then continue on to reading the passage from a Bible.

First Reading (Genesis 9:8–15)

- ▶ This is the account of the covenant God entered into with Noah, his family, and all of creation after the flood. It is a solemn promise from God not to allow chaos (symbolized by the flood) to overtake creation and humankind.
- ▶ The rainbow in the sky is the sign of this covenant. It is the bow of the bow and arrow without the arrow. It symbolizes that God and God's people are not at war with one another.
- ▶ It should be noted that the covenant is made with all of creation, not just Noah and his family, and that it is multi-generational.

Second Reading (1 Peter 3:18–22)

- ▶ The author sees Noah and the flood pointing to Christ and baptism. Just as Noah saved others from the devastating waters of the flood, so Christ saved others from the ultimate destructive separation.
- ▶ In baptism we were incorporated into the same covenant initiated by God with Noah and continued and fulfilled by Jesus the Christ.

Gospel Reading (Mark 1:12–15)

- ▶ This is the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert.

Reflections

Lent: A Time of Testing

Each year, on the first Sunday of Lent, the Gospel reading is one of the accounts of the temptation of Jesus in the desert by Satan. The Gospel of Mark has the shortest account, only three verses. The Greek word used in this passage and translated “tempted” can also mean “to be put to the test.” Like Jesus, we enter the Lenten desert to have our faith put to the test and to discern who we are called to be in relationship to God.

Since the story mentions Jesus spending 40 days in the desert, it is most appropriate for the first Sunday of Lent. The number 40 is highly symbolic in Sacred Scripture. In Hebrew, every number has a symbolic meaning and 40 is the number of human testing and preparation for a future mission taken on for God. So, for example, the rains came down for 40 days and nights during the Great Flood (see Genesis chapters 6–9). What happens afterward? God forms a new covenant with Noah. We see in the book of Exodus the people wandering in the desert for 40 years before they enter the Promised Land to begin their new life of freedom. In the Gospels, Jesus goes into the desert for 40 days to be tempted by the devil before returning and beginning a new public life and ministry. In many ways that is what Lent is all about for us: a time of preparation and testing, leading to a renewed life of faith.

Lent: A Time when the Holy Spirit Is with Us

The Gospel of Mark makes it clear that the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert. In other words, he was not alone while being tested. The Holy Spirit, wild animals, and angels were with him. That same Holy Spirit that “drove” Jesus into the desert drives us into our own personal “deserts” to rediscover God. With our own hectic pace, sometimes we need to have the Spirit “drive” us into a desert place to spend more time by ourselves so as to confront our temptations and to turn ourselves toward God and each other. It is in the deserted part of our lives that we find out if we really are believers in Jesus and, like him, rely on God to save us and strengthen us.

The Desert: A Place of Journey and Discernment

In the Bible, the desert—sometimes called the wilderness—is a rich, metaphorical symbol filled with a variety of meanings. The desert is a hard place to live, with hot daytime temperatures and cold nights, dust storms and lack of water, not to mention wild animals, including snakes. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), ancient Israel’s four decades in the desert were not simply a time of aimless wandering, of pointless movement. The people were on a journey to enter into covenant with God. We

are on a similar journey during Lent, and various temptations against that journey occur. The first is the temptation to simply stop the journey, to settle down and to say: "That's enough! Let's stay here." The second temptation is to reverse the journey, to go back to where we came from, as suggested by the Israelites who complained to Moses in the desert: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" (Exodus 14:11). Another temptation is nostalgia for the past, which looks more attractive, safer, and more secure than the present. As well it should! We have already been there; it holds no surprises. In nostalgia, we want to exchange the present with the past in order to avoid the future. In Lent, however, we journey into the desert to discern our future commitments. The desert affords us an opportunity to examine how well we have aligned ourselves with God, Christ, and one another.

The Desert: A Place of Testing

Both ancient Israel and Jesus were tempted and tested in the desert. Jesus is put to the test in this wasteland by Satan. In Greek Satan means the "Hinderer." A hinderer is anything—any person, event or circumstance, decision, culture or relationship—that keeps us from fulfilling our promises and commitments to be faithful to our covenant with God. And it is significant that Jesus did not overwhelm Satan the "Hinderer" with majestic splendor. He simply held his ground until the Satan went away. Neither do we have to beat the devil; we just have to survive the desert, remembering that the Spirit has driven us there and is with us. But if we survive the desert experience, we come out different persons.

Emerging from the Desert

Jesus, according to the Gospel of Mark, emerges from the desert proclaiming the Gospel of God and repentance. The first step of our Lenten journey is to: "Repent and believe in the Gospel." Only by following the way of Jesus through the Gospel, hearing his word, and adopting his values can we understand more deeply the mystery of God's reign. Lent calls us to what, in Greek, is known as *metanoia*—a change of direction, an about-face, a second look at life and belief, an act of trust in God who guides the unfolding journey.

For Reflection

1. Reflect on your own "desert experiences." What were they like? How did you face them? How were you changed by them?
2. How does your faith help you to face the various tests (temptations) that you experience daily in life?
3. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit working in your life?

Closing Prayer

Leader: For our time together today.

All: God's holy name be blessed and praised.

Leader: For all the blessings we have received from God.

All: God's holy name be blessed and praised.

Leader: For this season of Lent, may it be a time of spiritual growth for all of us.

All: Amen.

Pray together the Our Father, then exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.

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