

Homily for the first Sunday in Lent. March 1, 2009

Lent begins this year with a reading from the Noah section of Genesis. The Noah story begins with a notice of the depravity of the people. Some translations use the phrase, “God was sickened by the sins of man.” God was sickened because he saw the sadness and the hurt that sin caused.

Yet, the goodness of one man, Noah, kept God from destroying mankind. He protected Noah’s family from the flood. It was a sign that Humanity would eventually reach salvation through the waters of baptism. At the end of the story, to demonstrate that he would never destroy mankind again, God sets his bow in the sky.

When we think of a rainbow today, we think of the colors, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow or the beauty of nature. Ancient people didn’t focus on the colors, they focused on the bow itself; they saw it as God’s bow and arrows. The Greeks often depicted Zeus hurling thunderbolts. In the Noah story, the Hebrews thought of God shooting thunderbolts with his bow and arrow.

But, now, after the flood, God hangs up his bow. He will not use it again, so He sets it in the sky like he’s hanging it on a nail over the mantel. The point is that God will not give up on humanity. This is the covenant He made with Noah and it includes us. **God will not give up on us.**

And we can’t give up on ourselves. That’s the real problem: very often we give up on ourselves. Because

we've fallen in the past, we convince ourselves that we don't have the power to fight off sin when temptation shows up. Some popular psychology says we don't have to take responsibility for our actions. So, a person can get away with saying, "I might do this evil or sinful thing, but my action is caused by things beyond my control, rooted in my background, or in my genes. I am not responsible for my actions. Therefore, I don't have to fight the sin I'm tempted to commit."

Are we powerless in the face of temptation? If we make the choice to be exposed to temptation, then our ability to withstand it is greatly reduced. For example, an alcoholic is tempted to drink every day of their lives, even if it has been years since they had a drink. But if that person is on a business trip, is lonely, and goes to a bar, the temptation might be far more than the person can withstand. But the person is really not powerless because they can choose not to go to that bar.

Although we have the power to withstand temptation, the greatest source of our power is not within us as much as it is in the strength we receive from the Lord. People who fight off temptations do so because they are willing to rely on and ask for the power of God.

"I will set my bow in the sky as a sign of the covenant between you and me." God promised Noah and us that he will never give up on us. His love for us is too strong for him ever to give us up. No matter what our particular temptation in life is, we can withstand it as long as we face up to it with the Lord.

But we also have to take responsibility for our actions. We have to recognize that we can do evil and we can hurt others. We have to pray daily. The rainbow, the sign given to Noah, is God's promise that he knows our weaknesses but will stand beside us to give us the strength and the grace to overcome them. He will never let us go.

Although we are tempted continually, and although we may have failed in the past, we have no right to give up on ourselves. We have no right to surrender to sinfulness and consider ourselves unfit to do the right thing. No matter what mistakes we may have made, God is still there, faithful to us, offering his love, grace and strength to keep us from falling a third, fourth, fifth or fiftieth time. If God refuses to give up on us, then what right do we have to give up on ourselves?

Jesus went out in the desert with the wild beasts. And angels ministered to him. During Lent we are asked to name the wild beasts in our lives. What are the particular things that devour our spiritual life? With the help of the angels, with God's love we can and will fight them off.

That is what Lent is all about: spending forty days fighting off the beasts, preparing to announce the Kingdom. We can do it. We have only to look at the rainbow and know that God will never give up on us. Allow God to work his wonders in us. We can change. We must change. His mission for us demands it. His love for us makes it possible.