

The First Sunday in Lent, Year B, 2009
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

All the lessons this morning lead us into Lent. Today is the First Sunday in Lent. In the Old Testament reading from Genesis, we read the ancient story about God's great promise to Noah and his descendants. To paraphrase the scripture, God said, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you, your descendants and all living creatures. You are coming out of the darkness of sin. The waters of the flood have washed sin away. You are a new people, with a new beginning. I am your God and I will keep this covenant with you, forever." The point of this story is to introduce, to us, the theme of new life in God. It is a theme of leaving the darkness behind. The rainbow symbolizes the promise of that new life in God. The rainbow is a symbol of hope. It is a symbol of promise. It is a symbol of God's steadfast love, which is unconditional and everlasting. The rainbow is the precursor of the Cross.

Our New Testament reading, from First Peter, says much the same thing. The author links the waters of the flood to baptism. He suggests that the flood, theologically, was a precursor of baptism. That is a good way of understanding baptism. In baptism, we are brought into a new covenant with God in Christ, leaving sin and darkness behind. Through baptism, we find a new rainbow of light and a new promise. It is the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Mark's Gospel tells us of our Lord's baptism. Significantly, for the second Sunday in a row, we hear the same voice of God the Father speaking from the heavens – a repeat of the mountain theophany. It is the same statement, the same proclamation. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Through Jesus, the only Son of God, we leave the darkness for a new day, a new beginning, and a new life of grace.

We are now in the season of Lent. It is easy to associate Lent with darkness, because of Lent's emphasis on remorse and penitence. But Lent is not the darkness. Lent is the journey through the dark spots of the soul that takes us to the light of Christ. Lent is the voyage of self-discovery that takes us, through spiritual discipline and self-examination, and through courage, to the light of salvation in Jesus Christ. Traditionally, we think of Lent as a time for sacrifice. Perhaps it should be. True self-sacrifice for the good of others is a most worthy thing. The unfortunately reality is that far too often our Lenten sacrifice is only a token sacrifice. If we give up anything at all it is something truly insignificant, so that we only act as if we are putting ourselves out for Jesus. How hard is it to give up ice cream or chocolate during the forty days of Lent, or red meat for a handful of Fridays?

I don't deny the value of symbolic sacrifice, but it is very easy for us to miss the point. The journey of Lent is not nearly so much about giving up something as it is about taking on something. We are called to take on the armor of Christ. We are called to seriously consider what discipleship is all about and, with the courage that comes from the certainty of our salvation in Christ, vow anew to become Christ in this world. Certainly,

the world gives us, as individuals, as a parish and as a church plenty of opportunities to do the work of Christ in this world and to be Jesus to our neighbor.

Ours remains a call to discipleship. The Christian task is always to know Christ and to make him known. To do this, we must take up the Cross. Lent paves the way of the Cross. It straightens the paths of our spiritual journeys. Lent seeks to give us a true compass heading towards heaven and bring us safely home. *Amen.*