

Sunday February 21, 2021 - First Sunday in Lent

WORSHIP FOCUS: “40 Days”

Christ shared our experience; he suffered as we suffer; he died as we shall die, and for forty days in the desert he underwent the struggle between good and evil. ~*Basil Hume*

1st LESSON: Genesis 7:17-24, 8:1-19

For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits. Every living thing that moved on land perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days.

God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth.

At the end of one hundred fifty days the waters had abated; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him.

He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.

Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

In the six hundred first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, “Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.”

So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

REFLECTION: “Stretched”

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Liturgically, Lent lasts the six weeks between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. In Latin, the name for this religious season is the Quadragesima, which means fortieth, because, well, that is around the length of time that the six weeks takes.

If you are interested in biblical numbers, you probably know that 40 is a special number in scripture. Jesus, as our scripture reminds us today, retreated to the desert to fast and pray for 40 days before making his final visit to Jerusalem. And, it was during these 40 days that Jesus was tempted by the adversary. When we celebrate Lent, we remember those forty days. We too face our demons.

Periods of forty days and forty years are common in scripture. Usually these periods of forty denote times when God tests us. For example, the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years before God allowed them to cross the Jordan River and enter into the land of milk and honey. Moses fasted for forty days before God revealed the commandments to him. Elijah starved and despaired on a mountaintop for 40 days before he finally heard the still, small voice of God. Goliath taunted David for 40 days before they tested each other’s mettle. And the three great kings of Israel, Saul, Solomon, David each reigned for forty years.

Certainly, if I were to ask most people how long Noah and his family floated in the ark, almost everyone who has ever been to Sunday school would answer, forty days and forty nights.

Forty is a tidy number. Forty is just about the time we can stand when we are being tested. It is a safe time for God’s people to practise being tested.* For Jews, the period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur corresponds to the 40-day period Moses was on the mountain receiving the second set of tablets. For Muslims, the festival of Ramadan celebrates the 40 days that the forty-year-old prophet Muhammad spent in the cave of Hira, where he received the first of the divine revelations that were to become the Koran.

So common is the religious idea that 40 days is the divine period for a test, that during the plague years of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, doctors decided that, since God had tested so many people in scripture for forty days, that a good period to test to see if someone was better after having the plague was forty days. And so, quarantines originally lasted for forty days. Indeed, you will notice that the word ‘quarantine’ has that same root as the Latin word for Lent, ‘Quadragesima.’

And yet, if there is anything that we have learnt in the past year, it is that being tested in real life does not actually happen on schedule. The clearly defined liturgical, sacramental, safe periods of testing we celebrate as God’s faithful, are entirely different from the real, dangerous tests we often have to endure.

Sometimes we are tested in a moment. Time seems to stand still, and what happens in the eternal instant shapes our lives and determines who we are for years to come. One poor choice, made in the blink of an eye can haunt us forever. One good choice, made without much thought, can set us on the road to happiness.

Sometimes, the opposite happens, and the testing period is longer. Sometimes our expectations of what might be a reasonable time to face a challenge – say forty days – takes much longer than that. Sometimes the challenges we face are stretched out over months, even years.

During Lent, we usually spend forty days preparing ourselves for The Resurrection of Christ. During Lent, we usually spend forty days considering the ways that we might be complicit with the deaths of people like Jesus who are living today. We question the strength of our faith, and our willingness to accompany Jesus. We

confront our limits as Christians. We do so, safe and secure in the knowledge that The Resurrection is coming. That we only have to face ourselves for so long. That there is an end in sight.

I am painfully reminded today, however, that even though we celebrated Lent last year, and got to Easter Sunday, in reality, for the past year, as we have been coping with the worldwide COVID19 pandemic, our Quadragesima -- our Quarantine -- has lasted much longer than forty days. Indeed, there is a sense that we are still in a sort of Lent as we enter this second Lent, and that our time of testing and temptation has exceeded our scheduled, realistic expectation of forty days.

And I am reminded that just as there are attempts in our Bibles to make the time period of temptation and judgement, and the final appearance of grace neat and tidy, that there are also stories in which the difficult times are not completed on schedule. And yet, God's people still manage to reach dry land.

If you look at the story of Noah that Sheila read today, you will see that the rain of the flood does fall on the earth for forty days and forty nights, as most of us know and remember. The story starts with that tidy expectation of a trial lasting forty days.

I wonder, however, if you were surprised by all the other time periods that occur in the story, which seem to get tacked onto that tidy time period of forty days and forty night. Once the rain stops falling, the ark floats on the water for 150 days. Then after 7 months, the ark rests on the top of the mountain of Ararat. Three months later, the tops of the mountain appear. Forty days after those mountain tops appear, Noah sends out the raven and the dove for the first time. Nothing. Seven days later Noah sends the dove out again. The dove brings back an olive branch. Seven days after that, Noah sends the dove out another time. Success. The dove does not return.

We know, if we have been reading this story carefully, that already a year -- way more than forty days and forty nights -- has passed. Then on the first day of the New Year, Noah finally removes the cover from the ark, and sees that they are surrounded by land that is drying. And then, at the end of that second month, Noah finally sees that the land is dry, and that it is safe to leave the ark.

I wonder if Noah and his family thought, when their time of temptation began, that it would last just forty days. When we went into our quarantine about a year ago, our church's Friday morning Zoom coffee group took bets on when we each thought that the pandemic would be over and we might return to normal. Even those who were the most pessimistic about when a return to church might take place predicted an end to our troubles that has now passed by almost six months.

In the past year as our time of testing has been stretched, we have often been bitterly disappointed. Often we have been tempted. And yet, somehow, we have been able to stretch our expectations of when our time or trial and temptation will be over, refuse to turn a blind eye to the goal, or our hope in The Resurrection.

During this terrible Lent -- we have all had a little bit of the experience of Job. We have all been tempted to deny our God. To say with the fool, that what we are experiencing is a tale told by an idiot.

And yet, we are still here. We have managed to believe in the rainbow and say, "Get thee behind me Satan." Like Job, in his own time of trial, in his time of great uncertainty, we have clung to the gift of Easter by hook and by crook -- "We know that our saviour liveth."

In this time, in this real time of Lent, that has dragged on for so long, we have done what Lent calls us to do liturgically. We have walked with Jesus and each other. We have witnessed pain and suffering. We have committed to seeing this terrible time through. And, we have believed Jesus when he tells us, that although he will die, death will not triumph, and that life will have the last word.

Thanks be to God.

**Our mania for making everything tidy even plays out liturgically. In Protestant and Western Orthodox Churches, the season of Lent lasts from Ash Wednesday to the evening of Holy Saturday. This calculation makes Lent last 46 days! So, in order to make the time period exactly 40, and tidy things up, the 6 Sundays in Lent are excluded.*