

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD  
IN  
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY  
First Sunday of Lent  
February 18, 2024**

**SCRIPTURES READINGS:**

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| <b>Genesis 9:8-15</b>  | God makes a promise of life and seals it with a rainbow. |
| <b>1 Peter 3:18-22</b> | We are saved through the waters of baptism.              |
| <b>Mark 1: 12-15</b>   | Jesus encounters his human dimension in the desert.      |

**READ THE SCRIPTURES:**

*Read the Scriptures carefully in your group, beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church community. What does God want the community to hear today?*

**SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:**

**Mark:**

Mark has a rather succinct version of the Temptation of Jesus in the Desert. In two verses, we are told that: 1. The Spirit of God is at work here. 2. The environment is a desert. 3. The duration is 40 days. 4. Satan opposes the intentions of God. 5. Wild animals are Jesus' companions. 6. Angels care for him.

Such is the context for the life of the Lord's disciples. We need to remember that Mark's Gospel is always addressed to the disciples of Jesus in the days when the Gospel was written and in our day also. Just as Jesus was defined in his person and in his mission, so the Church of today takes its definition and its purposes from what happened to Jesus in the desert and throughout his life.

The Spirit of God brought all reality into existence at the beginning of creation. The whole environment was a "waste" (desert) before living things were brought into being. Forty years in the desert made the Hebrews into God's people. Moses spent 40 days on the mountain to receive the Law. Elijah walked a journey of 40 days to bring the gift of life. Jesus came face to face with the choice that faces every human being: opposing God or cooperating with God. Living peacefully with wild beasts is a sign of the imminent reconciliation of all things in the universe. God will take care of those who belong to God.

Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, a land despised by the official religious establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem. The population is of mixed origins here: Jews, Gentiles, Greeks, Syrians, etc., a mixed, corrupt breed. It is Mark's way of saying what Matthew and Luke say by having the Good News first announced to shepherds from the hills and to Magi from the East, a mixed breed to say the least!

We are called Christians because we are disciples of Jesus Christ. We are named after the one who is our master. We take our directions from the one who has called us into fellowship with God through his dying and rising. The disciples of Jesus are formed by him into a community of love and service. Discipleship is nothing if it is not a call to reconciliation and love with one another, a call to community. In community, disciples overcome their selfishness and pride. In community, we find

acceptance, affirmation, and trust, the foundations of love and peace. In community, we come through our desert experience and are ministered to by “angels,” God’s servants in the Church.

### **Genesis:**

The Book of Genesis has many levels of authorship and tradition. One of the oldest strands of its content has to do with the flood and the first covenant made by God. Other Near Eastern cultures have similar flood stories, but in Genesis, the theological focus is clearly set on God’s promise to honor human life forever, never again to punish humanity in this way. The point of the story is that God is still faithful to that promise. The story of the flood and of its meaning have little to do with actual history. We waste our time trying to find the Ark on Mount Ararat in modern-day Turkey. This is a religious narrative, not ancient history.

### **Peter:**

The First Letter of Peter represents a Christian author, perhaps one generation after the Prince of the Apostles, who reflects on the role of baptism in the life of the new disciple of Christ. The waters of baptism are symbolic of the waters of the flood: destructive of sin and life giving in grace. New life in God springs forth now from the waters of baptism. The rainbow of God’s promise now reminds us of the risen life of Christ given to us in baptism.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. Discuss the experiences that for you have been times when you had to confront the dimensions of your life that were not yet fully surrendered to God. Has there been for you a time of testing where you know now that God was refining you so that you would more completely give yourself over to God’s love? Identify the persons who were like angels comforting you during these trials.

2. Tell stories from your experience that illustrate how God works to support us through the love and comfort that comes from family, friends, and parish community, as we exercise our discipleship. Who are the people who represent God’s angels to you today whenever you need assurance and comfort?

3. Imagine out loud what Jesus’ initial preaching would be like today if he began his public ministry in Gardiner or Grand Isle, Maine, at the beginning of Lent. What does the Church need to hear from the Lord at this particular time in its journey of faith? Spell out some of the elements of the message that Mark would have us hear today.

## PRAYING TOGETHER

**Make me know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth,  
and teach me.**  
From Psalm 25

## CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The *Season of Lent* is a sacred time because it leads the Christian community into the most sacred time in the whole year, the *three days*, the *sacred triduum*. We anticipate, during a period of 40 days, the special holiness of the three days when we will renew the Supper of the Lord, enter again into his sacrificial death on the cross, and experience once more his rising to life on the third day. No time in the Church year is more holy than those three days. The period of the 40 days that leads us to this sacred time is made holy by the goal toward which we strive, the triduum. Lent does not have its own internal meaning. It points to the mysteries of the Easter event. It takes its meaning and its value from the three days of our salvation. It does not exist for its own sake. We don't do Lent for the sake of Lent. We do Lent so that we may enter more profoundly into the Paschal Mystery.

Our entering into the mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ first took place for us in our baptism. The Church community looks forward to its own dying and rising again with Christ in the renewal of its baptism during the three days. Each parish community, each family, each intentional Christian community, is born again as community in Christ at Easter time.

Baptism is the great sign of God's everlasting love for us. Baptism suggests the primary image that gives meaning to the season of Lent. The Church will enter again into the bath of discipline, leading to the joy of Easter. The Church community longs with an eager heart for the refreshing waters of springtime and rebirth.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are a people who willingly live under the discipline of the cross. We do not run from the cross of Christ. We embrace it with fear and trembling, but eagerly, with the conviction that we will become more like Jesus our master when we submit to its discipline and its saving power.

The Gospel according to Mark is addressed to disciples. That is who we are.

See: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*: # 1171

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