

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent 2021

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When you think of water, what comes to your mind? What images do you see? What feelings do you have?

Of all the natural elements of the world, water is most important for us as humans. Scientists suggest the mass of our bodies is composed of nearly 60% of water, with some organs almost entirely made of water. As such, we depend upon water for life. While we may be able to live without food for extended periods of time, our bodies cease to function in a matter of days without water. We simply cannot exist without water.

As I consider the questions I posed to you moments ago, I immediately imagine the life-giving and purifying sense of water. One of the first things my partner and I do after getting off a plane and arriving at a resort is to run to the ocean and dive into the warm waters. The euphoria I feel as I rise out of the waters, with waters washing over my body, is beyond words. It's as if the long winter is washed away and hope for another summer becomes real.

Or I imagine the countless times my father would challenge my brothers and me to races in a pool. The test was not only to see who could last the longest under water, but which of us could reach the end of the pool before our dad. Seemingly like initiation rites of old, we'd feel an extraordinary sense of pride when we would rise from the waters to see we had indeed won the race. It was as if we matured into adulthood in the waters.

Yet water also conjures feelings of fear, as I recall the many times the Great Mississippi River would flood its banks. Once, after several days of storms, my family left my grandparent's home outside of St. Louis, Missouri, only to discover the Mississippi had flooded huge swaths of land. I vividly remember sitting in the back seat of the car fearfully wondering why my father drove down an isolated road with

waters on either side just waiting to submerge the road. I thought for sure we were about to be consumed by the raging waters, for no land could be seen for miles.

Or I recall the early days of learning how to swim, when my father would throw us boys out into the river or a pool. Despite the fear I would sink and not return to the surface, I'd rise to the top of the water only to discover I could keep myself afloat. This was a tradition of my family that I'd later see repeated with cousins, nieces, and nephews. No sooner would we emerge from the waters of the womb than would we find ourselves once again in the water, held up by our mothers' arms.

While the cultures and societies of our world may have striking differences, we all share a common sense of water. Just consider the countless ancient flood stories prevalent across the globe. Our ancient Hebrew ancestors were not the only ones with a flood story. In fact, their Babylonian neighbours shared a very similar flood story, the myth of Atrahasis. Yet unlike the Babylonian and countless other tales, the Genesis story concludes with God forming a relationship, a covenant, with humanity and all of creation. The Babylonian legend, while also an ancient explanation of why things are the way they are, ends the story not with hope but with the gods replacing the great catastrophe with perennial tragedies forever plaguing humanity. Here is where the Genesis storyline departs from the other tales. While others end with suffering and death, Genesis ends with the promise of redemption and life.

And so we come to the point and purpose of not only today's scripture readings, but also that of Lent. While you and I were likely raised to believe Lent as a time of penitence and confession, the season is really about life. Even the Anglo-Saxon name for this liturgical season symbolises its true meaning: Lent is an old word for spring. Lent is the springtime of faith, when new life is born. And from where does this new life spring forth? Water, the waters of Baptism.

The season we've come to know as Lent was for several centuries a season by which candidates — or what we could call catechumens — would prepare for their Baptism on the Great and Holy Night of Easter. After many months, and in some cases, years

of preparation and weekly dismissal from the Liturgy before the assembly celebrated the Eucharist, the catechumens would finally see their journey arrive to its culmination. Yet before they could taste life, they had to die in the waters of Baptism and be born into new life.

So serious did the early Church take Baptism that the catechumens would be held underwater until they struggled to arise from the waters gasping for air. Much to the relief of mothers everywhere, we no longer hold infants or adults in the waters. Yet the same meaning remains to be true: in water we die and in water we are born again.

The scripture readings appointed for Lent have come down to us from those early days of the Church. So we, like the catechumens of centuries past, contemplate in this first week of Lent the mystery of water, the Sacrament of Baptism. Our meditation turns to the new life that flows from the raging waters of Noah and the life of grace flowing from Jesus the incarnate Son of God.

As Noah, his companions, and the many living creatures emerged from the ark, God forms a relationship with Noah and creation by forming a covenant with them. While you and I have largely become accustomed to the word covenant, God's decision to form one with humanity and creation is remarkable. Theologically speaking, if God is God, then God gains nothing from a relationship with us. Though that may be the case, God still enters into relationship with us and God gives his first promise to Noah.

So accustomed are we to God being in relationship with us, we forget how unusual this was in the ancient world. For the most part, gods and goddesses were rather precarious figures and one had to be careful not to provoke the gods' and goddesses' wrath. Complex systems for appeasing the gods appeared around the world, in places as remotely apart as Greece and Mexico. The gods demanded sacrifices, not relationships with humans. And if they did enter into relationship with a human, those relations were often distorted and often in the favour of the god who formed them.

Yet the God of Noah reaches out in love to his people. To be sure, God's anger could easily be stirred, but not unpredictably. God's anger arose when humanity failed to care for one another, to care for creation, and to abide by God's ways. And, as we shall hear in later biblical stories, God is moved by human pleas for mercy.

God reveals God's self to Noah, and his ancestors down to our own very time, as a God of extraordinary love. Our God is a God of love who not only seeks to enter into relationship with us and creation, but a God who yearns not for sacrifice but for us to rend our hearts and entrust ourselves to him in love as we heard days ago in our Ash Wednesday readings. To show his commitment of love for us, God transforms the rains from flood into a majestic and colourful bow in the sky. The waters that once cleansed creation of sin and injustice, now become the waters of life and a sign of God's everlasting fidelity to his people.

Despite the extraordinary efforts of God to enter into relationship with us, humanity repeatedly fails to live up to its side of the covenant. By rights, our turning away from God means the covenant God made with Noah is nullified. You see, in the ancient world covenants were binding agreements between two parties, with each side agreeing to uphold its commitment to the accord. One form, more commonly practised by a people known as the Hittites, was an obligatory covenant between two parties of equal standing. The other — the one we more commonly read about in the Bible — was a promissory covenant in which a greater power, such as a king, would promise certain privileges to a lower party. This is the form of covenant that God makes not only with Noah, but also with Abraham and Moses. In this form of covenant, God is bound to maintain his promise even when we fail to uphold our end of the bargain. Thus, the Israelites remain God's favoured people, even though the Old Testament makes clear they often fail, like you and me, to live up to the standard of the covenant. Not only did God take on the burden of having to be faithful to the covenant at all times, God also would bear the blunt of the curse if God failed to remain faithful to the covenant he made.

And God remains faithful to his promise, ultimately to the point that despite his fidelity to the covenant he made, God will make the ultimate sacrifice for humanity in Jesus. So great is God's love for us, that God embraces the curse properly due to us.

Thus Jesus, though without sin, is plunged into the waters that once covered the earth. His baptism was not a baptism of forgiveness of sins but a baptism of embrace, an embrace of the fragility of humanity and human sinfulness. He takes upon his shoulders the sin, sufferings, and injustices of humanity. What we come to see and know in the stories of Noah and Jesus is a God of an infinite love and compassion for his people. In these stories, we encounter a God who will go to the greatest place of pain and suffering so as to ensure we have life.

The invitation to the catechumens and to us is this: will you enter the waters of Baptism in order to die to self and be born into life eternal? Will we, in our own imperfect ways, responds with love to God's offer of life and walk the way of life eternal? If so, we may, like Jesus, find ourselves in the desert at certain times, lonely and afraid. Yet the Spirit that came upon Jesus is the same Spirit that descends upon us and sustains us through our dark days and nights. God will never give up on us, no matter how far astray we go. For our God is a God of life and love who yearns to share relationship with us. Amen.