

First Sunday of Lent B - In the face of temptation, are we powerless? God will not give up on us.

February 21, 2021

Lent begins this year with a reading from the Noah section of *Genesis* (9:8-15). The complete Noah story in *Genesis* is from chapters six through nine. The story begins with a notice of the moral corruption of the people. ***When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, ... he regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved.*** But the goodness of one man, Noah, kept God from destroying mankind. He protected Noah's family and his creation from the flood. Mankind would eventually reach salvation through water, the water of baptism. Then at the end of the story, God promised he would never destroy man again, ***"I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings."***

"Bow"? Does God refer to beautiful rainbow or frightening lightning thunderbolt? When talking about a rainbow, our immediate image is the colours but the ancient people were focusing on the bow itself. They saw the bow as God's bow and arrow. Many of the ancients thought that storms and lightning were caused by various gods losing their temper with human and throwing thunderbolts and lightning at them. In the Noah story, the ancient Hebrews considered God as not just throwing thunderbolts, but shooting them with his bow and arrow. Now, after the flood, God promises to hang up his bow. He is not going to use it again. He sets his bow in the sky. The main point is that God will not give up on man. **This is the covenant with Noah and us. God will not give up on us.**

And we can't give up on ourselves either even though very often we do because we convince ourselves that we do not have the power to fight off sin when temptation shows up. There is a pop psychology that says we do not have to take responsibility for our actions. So, a person says, *"I may do this action which I know is evil, but my action is a result of forces beyond my control, rooted in my background, or in my genes. It's not my fault so why bother putting up the fight to avoid the sin I'm tempted to commit."* The question arises, though, **"In the face of temptation, are we powerless?"** If one allows oneself to be exposed to an intense temptation, then one's ability to withstand it is greatly reduced. For example, an alcoholic is tempted to drink every day. But if that person is alone on a business trip, feels lonely, and goes to a bar, the temptation may be far greater than the person can withstand. However, the person is not powerless because the person can choose not to go to that bar. I met a guy sitting next to me on the plane on one of my business trips. I noticed he was carrying a trumpet case. So I asked if he's a musician. He said no. He's a salesman with a lot of business trips. Instead of going to the bar after meetings, he stayed in his room, ordered room service and played the trumpet. He enjoyed it.

In this Sunday's Gospel reading (Mark 1:12-15), Jesus, immediately after his baptism, was led by *the Spirit into the wilderness far away from the madding crowd*. This was the only place and the only sustained time Jesus would have to wrestle with the forces that work against the will of God. It wasn't a choice for him to go there; it was a godly necessity. Before he could begin work as God's beloved, Jesus had to face hard realities: **he had to prepare for the test that would eventually ensure his obedience to God, even unto death.** The test involved beating down temptations to follow the ways of the world instead of the pathway to God, temptations to give in to the seductive powers that work against love and grace. In a way, Jesus is blazing the trail for us to follow. Mark specifically stresses **"He was with the wild beasts."** This amplifies the difficulty of Jesus' time in the wilderness and serves as a symbol of the

strength of the temptations that confronted him. The Greek word used for “beasts” refers to animals with a brutal nature – not Isaiah’s image of lambs lying down with lions.

Being **tempted by Satan** was as savagely atrocious as wild animals threatening to devour him. St. Mark reveals a vivid scene, but with the briefest description, leaving us to flesh out the details. Perhaps the image of the beasts can help us understand Jesus’ ordeal in experiencing his 40-day test of ultimate danger. He had to face down the powers that would seek to prevent him from doing God’s will in his coming ministry. He had to defeat those powers: totally, completely and decisively. Though he was alone, “**the angels waited on him**”, the same Spirit that announced him as God’s beloved. Afterward, Jesus moved out among God’s people, loving them as God loves, teaching them about God, and finally proving that we are loved by God without condition, by his making us all worth dying for.

Like Jesus in his humanity, we too have the power to withstand temptation. However, 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 due to 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 the rainbow, the sign that shows he knows our weaknesses and he loves us too much 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. We have to take responsibility for our actions. We have to recognize that we can do evil and hurt others when we are tempted because of our sinful nature. We have to pray continually. No matter what mistakes we may have made, God is still there trying to keep us from falling into the same hole the third, fourth or fifth time, or seventy-seventh time. If God refuses to give up on us, then what right do we have to give up on ourselves?

So this Lent, when we are tempted, let us pray: “Lord, I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to be this way. Lord, help me. God, may you work wonders in me as I struggle against those elements of my life that would keep me from fulfilling your mission for me.”