

First Sunday in Lent  
Year B

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

As we begin our Lenten journey, we are faced with an interesting collection of lessons. We begin with the joy of God's promise to Noah that mankind will never again be destroyed by a great flood and, as a sign of that promise, the rainbow appears in the heavens after the storm. The Gospel reading is Jesus' baptism. Again, we recount the proclamation that Jesus is God's chosen. The reading from the First Letter of Peter, though, contains a different theme - one of suffering. It is this reading that I would like to explore today.

At the time this letter was written, the Christians were undergoing persecution, both in the form of physical abuse and in the form of ridicule. It is to this situation that this letter is written. This is not a universal form of suffering, but specifically in persecution for their belief in Jesus as the Christ as reflected in their lifestyle. Much is said, both in the reading and in the verses leading up to it, about how we are to react to this suffering.

We know from the Passion story how Jesus suffered before and during the crucifixion. We also know how He reacted to this suffering, praying for His persecutors from the cross. While we may never have to experience something as horrific as the cross, how we respond to those who abuse us, or ridicule us, tells a lot about our walk with God. Do we live in fear? Do we try to retaliate against our abuser?

Fear is frequently expressed through aggression. Those who live in fear try to bolster themselves by being bullies and strike out at any who they feel might be weaker than themselves. We see this in cases of spousal abuse and in many aspects of racism. Some historians hold that the KKK was a means of poor white men, who felt threatened by free black laborers, to build themselves up in response to that fear. Thus, abusers are guilty of sinfulness. But, at the same time, those who are abused might blame themselves for the abuse. The writer of this letter says that the redemption for both groups can be found in the salvation of Christ.

Through His suffering, Jesus overcame the power of this world to inflict fear that comes from the imbalance of power. As we make the active decision to follow Jesus through the waters of baptism, we can claim the release from this fear. As the gospel song says - greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world. We are able to join St. Stephen and pray for our persecutors, not from a place of weakness, but in the strength that comes through the Holy Spirit.

Our baptism is our appeal to God for this strength - for the clearing of our conscience before God. Because Jesus was raised from the dead and inhabits the throne room of God, we have the promise of being with Him as joint heirs of the Kingdom. We need no longer fear the powers of this world - be it governments, or people who would strike out at us for our beliefs, or anyone who might want to threaten our safety. Just as the rainbow is a sign of God's promise to never

destroy the world again with a great flood, so the cross and resurrection and ascension of Jesus is a sign that we live in the promise of our salvation from the hate and corruption of this world. Yes, we still get wet from the rain, as we will also be tempted and threatened by others. But, we know in whom we live and move and have our being. The forces of this world can never defeat us if we continue to seek the will of God in all we do and trust in God.