

Homily, February 26, 2012  
First Sunday of Lent, cycle B

*Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25:4-5,6-7,8-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15*

On the liturgical calendar, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday.

But for me, it can often take a while for me to feel as though Lent has really begun. I'm not always ready for it on Ash Wednesday. Despite the fasting, abstinence, ashes, fish fries, vespers, stations-of-the-cross, there are years when it just takes me some time.

But this year it was different. Lent began for me with a simple gesture just after seven o'clock in the morning on Wednesday.

I stood just over there, at station five, if you know how we designate the communion stations. The first person stepped up to me and I traced a cross on her forehead with ashes and said "*turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.*"

But it wasn't simply that first moment.

I did it over and over: 20 times, 30 times, or more? I'm not really sure.

Each person -- each forehead -- was different, but the call was the same: "*turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.*"

With each repetition I understood a little better what I had been mulling over as I pondered today's readings. In that little ritual was a reminder of both God's providential care and his invitation to us to be his covenant people; a reminder of a divine plan that includes both predestination and free will.



*"God said to Noah and to his sons with him:  
'See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and  
your descendants after you ...'"*

None of the covenants in the Old Testament were made with an individual alone. The covenants were always covenants between God and his people, even though one man may have acted on behalf of the people.

In the Father's providential plan, his desire was for mankind to share in his divine life. It is predestined therefore, that there will be a community of blessed who

share in the life of the Trinity at the end of time and at the culmination of all things. These people, throughout the ages, are the people of God.

God is always reaching out to us, inviting us to become one of His people. To accept his invitation, to join the people of God, that is our choice.



During Lent, we have to ponder the words of the Psalmist:

*Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.*

Do we want to live by the covenant? Do we want to join those men, women, and children who have accepted the covenant and make up the people of God? If so, we have to make a commitment to God, -- that's the nature of a covenant. The visible sign of our love for God is that we keep his commandments.

Of course, we are sinners, and keeping the commandments is not so easy. We stumble and fall. But God is merciful and loving. He is our Father and we are his children:

*“Your ways, O Lord, make known to me,”*  
pleads the psalmist, *“teach me your paths,*  
*guide me in your truth and teach me,*  
*for you are God my savior.*

And so, in *the fullness of time*, God made one new and everlasting covenant with us: *Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God.*

Will we follow where he leads and join those already on the pilgrimage?



As the Church, the visible sign of the people of God, we receive great support and companionship on our pilgrim journey:

- We receive God's revelation through the scripture and the traditions and teachings of the apostles.
- We are sustained by the grace of the Sacraments, especially when we are nourished by the Eucharist and healed by Reconciliation.
- We are supported by our fellow travelers in the Church:
  - encouraged when we doubt and supported when we stumble,

- strengthened by our fellowship in prayer and worship,
- encouraging one another to do good works and promote justice and peace,
- and sharing all of God's good gifts with laughter and joy.



*“Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”*  
... ashes on the forehead, one after another.

Each one different;  
each one with a desire  
to be counted among the People of God,  
following the way of Christ.

We receive our salvation not just as individuals, but as the people of God, people of the new and everlasting covenant.

Perhaps this Lent, you might meditate on this:

Do I live my life in fellowship with God's people?

Perhaps you need to finally accept the covenant, or perhaps just commit yourself to it more faithfully.

The invitation is always there, it's your choice.