

**Sunday, February 18, 2024**

**First Sunday in Lent**

Genesis 9.8-17; Mark 1.9-15

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/911846307268770>

*(Sermon begins at about 30:00)*

### **“Lenten Renewal”**

With a smudge of ashes on our foreheads and the recitation of a litany for penitence, we began our Lenten journey this past Wednesday. As noted in the Invitation to the Observance of a Holy Lent, by these acts, “the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.” While there are many images from scripture and the unique prayers for Ash Wednesday that help frame what Lent is about, these words, as well as any, serve as a statement of purpose for our annual commemoration of Lent.

Lent is one of those seasons people either hate or they love. Some hate Lent because it seems a bit of a downer. The scripture readings, prayers, and music are more somber, with continual reminders of our sinfulness and the need for repentance, and reminders of our mortality and that one day we will return to dust. Some hate the season because they feel compelled to give up some favorite food or drink or activity in order to feel like they are doing, albeit reluctantly, what they “should” as Good Christians. There is a sense that Lent is a necessary evil that we just have to pinch our noses and power through to get to the joys of Easter Sunday, and back to the way life is meant to be.

Then there are those who love Lent. Not because they are closet practitioners of some sort of Goth or Emo sub-culture and relish the opportunity for six weeks to be able to tap into and publicly display their inner existential angst and the melancholy of our pitiful human existence. No, those who love Lent do so because of the deeper spiritual meaning behind this season. Because of the opportunity that Lent provides. One that, as our Invitation to the Observance of a Holy Lent notes, is about renewal of our faith.

Before I go any further, you can probably guess that I will be focusing more on this theme of renewal and the spiritual benefits for our commemoration of Lent. While my reflection may seem more of an argument for why everyone should love Lent as opposed to hating it, this is in no way meant to be a criticism of those who hate Lent. If you fall into that camp, I respect your feelings and perspectives. Because I’ve been there. I am a recovering Lent-hater. Well, that’s probably a bit too strong. I never hated Lent. When I was younger, I found it to be a bit annoying, and really did not see the purpose. Perhaps partially because I grew up in a faith tradition that did not embody the meaning of Lent as fully as our more catholic and Anglican tradition. So, I guess I was one who reluctantly tolerated Lent. Even after I became an Episcopalian in my mid-twenties, it still took me a while to develop an appreciation for what Lent is truly about. And even after 18 years of ordained ministry I continue to discover greater depth and meaning in our annual commemoration of Lent. So, I have made the transition from

one who merely tolerated Lent, to one who appreciates Lent, and now more fully into one who loves Lent. But we are all on our own journey and need to be true to that. But allow me to present how I have come to view this season we are now in.

To understand why we have Lent, it helps to briefly look at its origins, and then to see how this is reflected in our Gospel reading, which contains one of the iconic images for Lent.

The word “Lent” derives from an Old English word meaning “lengthen,” referring to the lengthening of days we experience this time of year, as we transition from winter into spring. Over time, Lent developed into a 40-day period focused on reflection, repentance, and preparation for Holy Week and Easter, as well as for the celebration of Eastertide which follows. Forty days may seem an odd amount of time. It isn’t even divisible by seven, giving a whole number of weeks. But there is method to the madness. In the Hebrew scriptures, the number 40 is significant. Forty was a stylized way to indicate a long period of time. Particularly a long period of time involving change. A time in which something new is happening. A time for new life—either during that period of time, or in the time to follow.

We see 40 reflected in many of the significant events in scripture. Forty days was intentionally chosen for Lent as a way of honoring and resonating with other key “40s” in Israel’s history and sacred memory.

During the great flood in Genesis, it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. As you may recall, God sent the flood to wipe out all creation, except for a chosen remnant, because of the sinfulness, violence, and corruption of humanity. The flood was intended to be a new start, a renewal, for humanity and all creation. A clean slate for creation to get back on the path God intended. Our Old Testament reading for today reports the ending of that process. Or rather, the beginning, as a new day dawns for creation, complete with God’s covenant that this would never happen again.

During the exodus, the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land. This was a time of renewal for God’s people, liberated from slavery. During this period—and the reason it took so long to get back to Israel—the people had the opportunity to renew their relationship with God and to re-learn what it means to be his people, preparing them for their return to their homeland. Preparing them to begin a new life as God’s chosen people.

During this time in the wilderness, Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai, where he was given the Law, which would guide the people in their wilderness journey; would guide them in their formation as God’s people; and would guide their religious and cultural lives from that time onward.

And then there is our Gospel reading for today, which records Jesus’ being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days—the quintessential image for the 40-day Lenten journey. Unlike Matthew and Luke, which give more information about Jesus’ time in the wilderness, Mark’s version that we heard today merely notes he spent this time in the wilderness. But this is bracketed by the account of Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of his public ministry once he

came out of the wilderness. His baptism being a sacramental act of renewal, where he heard “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Immediately after which he was taken to the wilderness. With the 40 days in the wilderness being a significant a time of renewal for Jesus. After his baptism and the confirmation of him as the Son of God, Jesus needed time away to come to terms with what that meant. To figure out just how he was meant to live into this new reality; to prepare himself for his public ministry. The beginning of the public ministry itself being a renewal of how he would live his life from here on out—no longer a carpenter in a small village in Galilee, but one whose ministry was to proclaim God’s love in word and action.

As we are told, his first public proclamation in this new role was “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The word “repent” means to have a change of mind or a change of heart. With the original Greek word used in scripture, *metanoia*, literally meaning “to turn around” or “to change one’s life.” These words calling for repentance being an invitation to renewal; being an invitation to new life.

All of these Biblical events—the flood, the exodus, Moses on Mount Sinai, Jesus’ time in the wilderness—all these “40s,” are times of renewal and new life for those involved. All entailing, in one way or another, an element of repentance—of turning around and beginning a new life in accordance with what God desires most for us. These stories of renewal and new life, which are so central to our faith and to humanity’s relationship with God, are all icons, providing insight into, what Lent is about. With the account of Jesus’ baptism, time in the wilderness, and start of his public ministry being particularly applicable images for what Lent means for us: a time of reflection and repentance in preparation for and support of our own ministries.

Lent is first and foremost about renewal and new life. It is about setting aside a period of time—a significant period of time of change—in which we intentionally focus on our lives of faith; on our relationship with Christ and with God; on how we might live more fully into the fullness of who God has created and called us to be. To faithfully do that necessitates some wading through the darker side of our own lives. To be honest with ourselves about our own sinfulness, about how we fall short in living as God wants us to. That is the darker side that we often associate with Lent. And it is a necessary part of the Lenten experience. But having willingly confronted that darker, shadow side of ourselves, we are able to see opportunities for repentance, for turning around and seeking new life. There is opportunity for grace and for renewal. There is opportunity for strengthened and renewed relationship with God. There is opportunity to grow more fully into our place as God’s beloved children. This is what Lent is REALLY about—embracing the light of God’s love, which transforms the darkness in our lives, making us new creations. Making us who we are truly meant to be.

In light of this, Lent is not really meant to be a 40-day inconvenience, after which we go back to the status quo. It is meant to be our annual reset, to get us back on track, from which we might have deviated since last Easter. It is meant to be a time of intentionally focusing on and exploring our faith and our relationship with God, with the goal of make permanent changes that strengthen that relationship and deepen our lives of faith.

Regardless of whether you love Lent or hate it, as we begin this Lenten season, I invite you to repent. I invite you to be open to a change of mind and a change of heart that leads you deeper

into your understanding of what it means to be a beloved child of God. May you find the renewal you seek. May you find the renewal you need. May you find the renewal that can only be provided by deeper relationship with God and service to him. And may these 40 days prepare you for the indescribable joy of the ultimate expression of renewal and new life we will witness as we end our Lenten journey at the mouth of an empty tomb.