

Genesis 9:8-15

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:12-15

On Ash Wednesday, we were urged, “Remember, you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.” On this First Sunday of Lent, the sacred word commands us, “Repent and believe in the gospel.” Seemingly, we do not believe and we are urged to look again and consider the gospel for which Jesus preached, lived, and gave his life. There is indeed something quite humbling in the willingness to receive ashes and to be told you are insignificant dust. This act of repentance opens the mind and the heart to hear the gospel and permits the gospel message to impact our lives. We do this lenten thing again and again, that our lives in Christ might be sustained and that Christ might reach the depths of who we are.

Our first reading from the book of Genesis invites us to ponder our religious history. God created the world and entrusted his creation to the care of human folks. Yet, we tragically turned away from God. God looked at the people and said, “They have lost their way. They seemed to be filled with corruption and don’t understand anything right. They are feeding each other all the wrong information. I’ve got to start over.” God starts over with Noah and his family and we are given a very different image of God. As God saved Noah and his family and the birds and animals, God says, “I’m never going to do this again. I’m never going to destroy people like this again.” It’s the beginning of our encounter with a God who forgives—an unheard-of idea at this time. This God seems to recognize that human kind is not going to change all the much, and God chooses a new approach. The rainbow is a symbol of God’s promise to take care of his creation, and at the same time, not to let too much rain fall on his people. God chooses to forgive the guilty, calling them, urging them to live more humbly before God and one another.

In the second lesson, the apostle Peter sees in this great flood an image of water that cleans and renews. This is the gift of baptism into Christ where God saves his people. Fundamental to the very nature of God is forgiveness, now embodied in Christ who teaches, heals, and brings to life. This insignificant dust that we are as human creatures is lifted up to something that has great potential. We continue to be easily distracted and we selfishly take care of ourselves at the expense of others. At the same time God patiently reaches out to us, inviting us to see more clearly, love more tenderly, and to walk humbly upon this earth.

In the gospel passage, we learn that the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert where he remained for 40 days. Jesus bridges the distance between God and this human family. He found himself between the Spirit and Satan, the angels and the wild beasts. This I would say is exactly where we human folks reside, where there is a great deal of tension between our humanness and the life that is genuine and meaningful. What Jesus wants to do is bring the human and the divine together as one. Our human tendency so often is to rise up in arrogance and to see ourselves as God, we want to go it alone, to be fully in control. Repentance is to come down and to go deeper into our roots, its coming close to what really is, who we are. We recognize that we have limitations and are much in need of God.

I would suggest that there are many things that stand in the way of our full embracing and living the gospel. In many ways the life that Jesus lived upon this earth, the message he taught stands in contrast to what I see in the world around me. I would so much rather be powerful, not powerless, I would rather be a success, not a failure, I like certainty, rather than be puzzled and perplexed. Pride and self-confidence are far more inviting than humility and openness to God. Jesus comes

upon the scene with something very simple—and life changing: “Repent and believe.” As we journey through this Lenten Season, there will be many stories from the scripture that convey a truth about who God really is. It is interesting that just as we begin any new understanding about anything, we begin to learn about our God with small increments of the truth. We get a little more, a little more, and finally we find ourselves in a different place than when we started.

We humbly begin this Lenten Season with ashes on our heads. We want to be open to seeing more clearly the gospel Jesus invites us to live. Through the sacred word and through the Eucharist may be ever more rooted into the life of Christ.