

DEACON JOHN HALL'S HOMILY

First Sunday of Lent, February 21, 2021

The First Sunday of Lent - let's plan for Lent this year to be only 40 days long! Last year's Lent officially started the last week of February but just a couple of weeks later sacrificing really kicked in . . . schools closed, the lockdown started and we sheltered in place. I remember that it was a most unsettling time. And no one knew what the future held for any of us. If only we had known, we would have prepared better. If the pandemic taught us anything, it would be planning and preparation is so important. And now it is time to prepare our hearts for Easter. As we heard in the Gospel: *The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.*

Every year on the First Sunday of Lent the gospel we hear is the wilderness temptation of Jesus. In all three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, the sequence of events just prior to this gospel are the same: Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, sealed with the Holy Spirit, followed by temptation in the desert. Mark's account that we heard today is the shortest – just three verses. One of the things that makes Mark's version of events slightly different is that he connects the baptism of Jesus with the temptation in the desert with the Greek word, 'euthys' which means: immediately. If you read Mark 1:12 in your bible, the first words may be 'immediately', 'right away', 'at once.' Mark uses this Greek word 'euthys' over 40 times in his Gospel, up until the beginning of the passion. His use of this demonstrates a sense of urgency in his Gospel. We will hear most of our Gospel readings from Mark in the year B cycle of reading so be mindful of that sense of urgency.

Perhaps Mark's Gospel is a challenge to us to ask ourselves if there any sense of urgency in our spiritual lives? How often do we hear ourselves saying: "I'll get to it tomorrow." "Next year I will volunteer more." "When I finish this project, I will spend more time with the family." "When I retire I will really have a spiritual life." "When I have more free time, I will . . ."

Our First Reading from Genesis reminds us of the importance of being prepared. The passage we read in the First Reading is the conclusion of the rich story of the great flood, Noah and the ark. It is a colorful account of returning humanity's focus to God. The authors of Genesis may have used a common memory among ancient peoples of a devastating flood, that struck without warning wreaking death and destruction in the lives of people. Perhaps this natural disaster was reinterpreted by the writers of Genesis as the consequence of sin and humanity's failed relationship with God. The good news is the conclusion of The Great Flood story leaves us hopeful, as God entered into covenant with all of creation of God's promise of restoration – not by destruction but by love. And the rainbow is a reminder of God's love for humanity.

We too, like the ancient peoples, lose focus on God and need reminders to rearrange our priorities. We need reminders to take time to work on our relationship with God. We need Lent! We need these 40 days of heightened awareness so that we can take time to examine our lives and make room for spiritual growth. Lent challenges us to acknowledge the clutter in our lives that lead us to unhealthy temptation and sin. Replace some internet and TV time with God time and scripture reading, maybe Lectio Divina (<https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/meditations>). Fasting and moderation of food and drink will remind us to share our blessings with the less fortunate. While is Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving we should also be mindful of the words of today's Gospel. *"This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*