

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

First Sunday in Lent, Cycle B – February 25, 2012

Gary Becker

Reflections on **Genesis 9:8-15;**
1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

During the season of Lent the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures review our salvation history. In this year B of our three year cycle the readings focus particularly on the covenantal relationship between God and the Hebrews during that history. So today we read of God's promise to Noah after the flood. And in coming weeks we will hear of Abraham's test of faith and God's promise to him, as well as the covenant of the Ten Commandments; and finally that wonderful promise in Jeremiah that God would inscribe a new covenant on the hearts of God's people.

As we reflect on these readings it is important to remember that to the Hebrews the covenants were solemn, binding agreements. In those times covenants were often formed between a powerful nation or person and a weaker, less significant one. The stronger one agreed to protect and provide, and the weaker one then owed allegiance to the stronger. While written documents were not common, the covenants were often formalized by a ritual and marked by a sign.

Please note that in every one of these Biblical covenants it was *God* who initiated the covenantal relationship. Those invited into the relationship needed only to respond to God's offer. Of course, as salvation history teaches, the people of Israel failed time and time again to keep the covenants they made with God. Yet despite those repeated failures, God never abandons them. Instead God continues to call the people back into a new relationship each time.

So the lesson here is clear and should fill us with hope. These covenant stories remind us again and again that our God has a persistent and relentless desire for relationship with hu-

manity. During this Lenten season we are all invited to reflect on our fidelity to our covenants with God. We are assured that God is waiting for our response. So, what is your covenant of prayer with your God for this Lenten season? Do you have allegiance to it?

I will say more about alms and fasting later, but prayer is the first and very important Lenten practice. In order to respond to God's constant invitation there is no substitute to committing regular time for prayer and meditation in order to discern carefully about your response to God with your life.

Today's gospel comes from Mark in this liturgical year, and is by far the shortest version of the temptation and the beginning of the public ministry. All of the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) have a version of these events but the other two contain additional material not found in Mark. While the story is very short, it is not simple, and it offers two important points for reflection: Jesus' temptations and Mark's account of the beginning of the public ministry.

Mark states that - following his baptism by John and affirmation from God - Jesus was immediately driven into the desert by the Spirit. There he was tempted among the wild beasts and ministered to by angels. Scholars remind us that this passage was written using apocalyptic symbols. This literature was not meant to be understood as literal fact. Rather, it used imagery and symbols to speak a coded message that would be ambiguous to the ruling powers, but understood by those for whom the message was really intended. To be a Christian in the days when Mark wrote was a dangerous and perilous vocation. Recall Chapter 4 of Mark where he tells the disciples they have been giv-

en the secrets, but those outside may look but not perceive and listen but not understand.

So let us look at this passage as Mark's audience would have. This kind of literature reminded people of the symbols of their faith and the remembered history of the Exodus and the Exile. It reminded people of the coming age when all people would be governed by God's justice, and portrayed their current struggle against political and economic powers of domination as a cosmic battle between good and evil. Apocalyptic literature was meant to offer hope to the people while they endured injustice, and also to encourage them to resist their oppressive conditions.

In the gospel Mark states that the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert. For the ancient Israelites the Spirit represented the power of God, and in Mark's time the reference to wild beasts represented the evil political and religious pow-

ers that controlled the world. The support of angels refer to the source of good in the world.

So the message is that through this testing Jesus met the challenge and renounced the dominant world order, and committed himself to the reign of God. Jesus was not proclaiming some utopian dream, or talking about the after-life. The challenge, then and now, is to reform and live the reign of God's justice. The time of fulfillment is now.

So how do we live God's justice in the Lenten season? Fasting is one practice, but we do not fast just to deny ourselves. We fast to bond with the two billion people around the world who will go to bed hungry tonight, and we give alms to free ourselves from greed so as to become free for union with those in great need.

Let us enter this Lent with great love and compassion for our human family.