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The First Sunday of Lent (B)

Have you ever noticed how people react upon seeing a rainbow? For those of us who do not often experience them, rainbows elicit a great excitement and a certain childlike joy as we see the colors stretching across the sky, and the fuller the rainbow, the greater our excitement.

We know perfectly well why the bow forms as sunlight passes through the droplets of water and yet we still pause to look at rainbows. There is something about a rainbow that simply captures our attention. I wonder, though, how often do we see through the rainbow, beyond the arc and the colors and the natural wonder, to the covenant that the Lord has made with us?

After the waters of the Flood receded, and after Noah built an altar to the Lord and offered sacrifice, God said to him:

This is the sign of the covenant that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings (Genesis 9:12-16).

If the Lord of heaven and earth recalls the covenant he has made each time a rainbow appears, should we not, too, also recall this covenant? Yes, we should, but too often we are forgetful of God, though he never forgets us.

But when we see a rainbow, what is it that we are to remember? What is the covenant the Lord has made with us? It is the covenant first made with Noah and renewed with Abraham and then with Moses, the covenant that was fulfilled and perfected in Jesus Christ. It is the covenant that we receive Baptism, the covenant sealed in the Blood of Christ.

Saint Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, tells us that the waters of the Flood "prefigured baptism, which saves you now" (I Peter 3:21). Just as Noah and his family was saved through the waters of the Flood inside the ark, so, too, Christians are saved through the waters of Baptism in the Church, which is the Barque, the ship, of Peter. Baptism "is not a removal of dirt from the body," Peter says, "but an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him" (I Peter 3:21-22).

How is it that the Lord Jesus ascended to heaven and sits now at the right hand of God? When Jesus accepted John's baptism "of repentance for the forgiveness of sin", the Spirit "immediately impels him into the consequences of that decision - consequences that will eventually lead to the cross" (Mark 1:4).<sup>1</sup> Just as Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise (cf. Genesis

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Healy, *Catholic Commentary of Sacred Scripture: The Gospel of Mark*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 38.

3:24), so "the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert" to be tempted for forty days (Mark 1:12), just as Israel was tested for forty years in the desert (cf. Deuteronomy 8:2).

When he allowed himself to be driven out into the desert, he accepted the history of Israel. "Jesus relives the story of Israel, but as an obedient son who is totally faithful in his own trial in the desert."<sup>2</sup>

When Satan tempted Jesus in the desert he was given the same choice as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the same choice as Israel in the desert. But unlike Adam and Eve, unlike Israel, Jesus remained faithful and obedient to God. Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father, victorious over Satan, sin and death, because he accepted his Messianic ministry from the Father in full obedience, docility and love.

Jesus goes into the desert for one purpose: to be "tempted by Satan" (Mark 1:12). From ancient times the desert symbolized the realm of evil, which was represented by the beasts dwelling there. Jesus goes to be tempted by Satan, "the prince of demons," whose very name means "adversary" (Mark 3:22). It is this adversary, this enemy, who seeks to thwart Jesus' every move throughout the gospels.

When Jesus enters into the desert, he "enters into Satan's territory deliberately, to begin his campaign against the powers

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

of evil. He is looking for a fight! Yet he will confront Satan not with a blast of divine lightning, but in his frail human nature, empowered by the Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

This battle with Satan that Jesus begins today is the very reason for his coming among us at Christmas, but why would he wish to fight the adversary in this way when he could easily fight him with his glory and majesty? Saint Lawrence says:

...in order that his victory might be the more glorious, he willed to fight Satan in our weak flesh. It is as if an unarmed man, right hand bound, were to fight with his left hand alone against a powerful army; if he emerged victorious, his victory would be regarded as all the more glorious. So Christ conquered Satan with the right hand of his divinity bound and using against him only the left hand of his weak humanity.<sup>4</sup>

He did so as an example to his disciples; he showed them how to overcome Satan and temptation by fasting, prayer and complete trust and obedience to the Father.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the attacks of the adversary increase all the more after Baptism as Satan tries to steal us back. But we can be confident of victory if we follow the example of Jesus; if we fast, if we pray with patient hope and if we remain attached to God in obedient trust, the victory belongs to us, or, rather to Jesus Christ, in whose victory we will share.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> From *A Word in Season: Readings for the Liturgy of the Hours* (Villanova, Pennsylvania: Augustinian Press, 1999), 7:245. Quoted in Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*, 39.

This is why the liturgical color for this season is violet. Violet is both the color of repentance and the color of royalty. The violet vestments call us to repent of our sins and amend our life even as they remind us of the victory of Christ over Satan.

These, then, are the weapons that we take up in the battle against Satan: prayer, fasting and alms-giving. These three weapons, these forms of penance, we call the Lenten discipline. The word discipline comes from the same root as the word disciple, a root that refers to a student. Discipline, then, is always meant to teach; the disciplines, the weapons, of prayer, fasting and alms-giving teach us to live more like Jesus; they teach us to be faithful to God even as they fight off the attacks of Satan.

This fight with the tempter is serious and one in which every Christian must engage. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that

Fighting against evil, against every form of selfishness and hate, and dying to oneself to live in God is the ascetic journey that every disciple of Jesus is called to make with humility and patience, with generosity and perseverance.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' example and victory in the desert shows us how to live in this way. In the desert, as on the Cross, "Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God" (I Peter 3:18).

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 1 March 2006.

Let each of us, then, recall the covenant the Lord has made with us, seeking in these days of Lent to renew the promises we made at Baptism to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ that the glory of Easter, the joy of heaven, might be ours. Amen.