

The readings for Sunday, February 18, 2018:

First Reading: Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm: Psalm 25:1-9 (Psalm 25:1-10 NRSV)

Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22

Gospel: Mark 1:9-15

We begin Lent back in the country of baptism. Once again, we hear the story of the baptism of Christ. Didn't we just cover this material a few weeks ago? Indeed we did, and it should remind us of the importance of this sacrament. It gives us a chance to notice what we might not have noticed before.

We see that baptism doesn't protect Jesus from the trials and tribulations that will come. In fact, he is driven into the wilderness, tempted by Satan, and I assume that the time with the wild beasts was not easy either. For those of us who think that if we just pray properly, God will give us what we need, we should reread this passage again. Who is this Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness? Is this Job's God making an appearance again?

This Gospel is not one that you would hand to non-believers to convince them that they'll have an easier life as a Christian. Look at the end of the Gospel lesson: John the Baptist has been arrested. We can't say we haven't been warned about what might happen to us when we do God's work in the world.

But we're not excused from doing it. The Gospel ends with Jesus continuing his mission, preaching the gospel of God.

Lent is at hand. Many people think of Lent as Spring Training Camp (or Boot Camp) for Christians—these images aren't mine, but I've seen so many people use them. Lent is a great time for us to get serious (again) about our faith journey. Lent is a great time to spend some contemplative time to consider the ways that we're living out our Christian faith and the ways that we could improve. Many people will give up something for Lent, like chocolate or alcohol or meat. Many people will add something, like more Bible reading, more prayer, more devotional reading, more charitable work.

The season of Lent begins by reminding us that we are dust, and all too soon, we'll return to dust. You can call yourself a creature made out of the ruins of stars (true!), but you're dust all the same. The lessons of Lent reinforce this message.

We're not here for very long, and most of us have already used up at least half the time we have in this life. We just do not have time for most of the self-defeating and self-destructive behaviors in which we engage. Now is the time to take our eyes away from our screens and to focus on something more important. Now is the time to give up our self-loathing and to focus on our God, who is well-pleased with us.