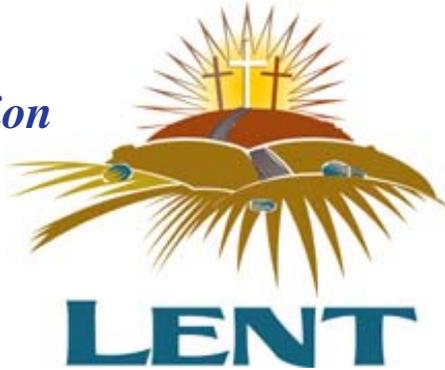


Our God is a God of 'Second Chances'

A Lenten Meditation

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Remember the Flood?

I'm talking about the big one that put the entire world under water. It hit hard and fast and was totally unexpected by most people. Noah had tried to warn his neighbors, but they all laughed at him.

Forty days after the rains began, they weren't laughing anymore.

This is how the author of Genesis portrays God's judgment. It's sudden, severe, and drastic. No messing around. First, man sinned in the Garden of Eden, for which he was evicted. Many years later, he's in trouble again, and sure enough it's a cloudburst!

It might have gone on like this forever. But God had a better idea. He would turn the tables on sin itself. He would transform man's weakness into an opportunity for grace, an occasion to prove his love and mercy, once and for all time.

God would show us that He is a God of "second chances."

That's the storyline, if you will, behind our redemption. Its narrative is the life of our Savior—his birth, ministry, passion, death, and

resurrection. Like Christ, you and I are called to escape the clutches of sin and death. We accomplish this through our faith in him and the lifelong process of being "born again."

Now I realize this term has some rather strong associations attached to it. But it isn't a phrase invented by Pentecostal Christians or "holy rollers," as some are uncharitably described. Indeed, it's found in the Gospels, notably in our Savior's conversation with Nicodemus: "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again." (John 3:3)

This message holds great meaning for Catholics, especially during Lent. We are blessed with a period of 40 days—the same amount of time it took to flood the earth—to contemplate our Savior's life journey and the events leading up to his atonement for our sins. Anytime is a good time, but Lent provides a special time to ask ourselves, "What does God expect from *me* in assuring my final salvation?"

In the First Letter of John, we find an answer.

1. *Admit you've sinned.* ("If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." 1 John 1:8)

Are you perfect? I didn't think so. Neither am I. Most of us can admit this fact to ourselves, but when it comes to acknowledging it to others, we balk. We don't trust what they might do with the information, as if it's a big secret. But if we can't hide the reality from others, we certainly can't hide it from God. So, mindful of the second point below, we should swallow our pride and fear.

2. *Recognize that God loves and wants to forgive you.* ("Your sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ." 1 John 2:8)

If you've ever been married, or a parent, or just grew up in a

normal family, you know what it's like to say, "I'm so mad at him, I could kill him." Would you really do it? No way! So think about it. If we who are imperfect are able and willing to forgive because of our love for others, how much more eager is God to forgive. He, after all, is love.

Or, if it helps, think about it this way: God has a lot "invested" in you. He created you in his own image, so he isn't going to give up on you that easily.

3. *Seek reconciliation.* ("If we confess our sins, God will surely keep his promise." 1 John 1:9)

Saying you're sorry is one thing; *meaning* it is something else. But it's hard to really mean it unless you know *why* you're saying it. This is why I insist that the Sacrament of Reconciliation can't be "oversold." It's not only that it's the world's oldest form of psychiatry, or that it's kosher for Catholics, if you'll pardon the phrase. It's that a good Confession necessarily requires a good *examination of conscience*.

This process brings us face to face with our egos and our motives for doing what we shouldn't or not as we should. And when we take an honest look at ourselves, we're not only in a better position to say we're sorry and mean it—we're also better able to understand what we need to do to set ourselves back on the right track. This is critical to benefiting from whatever penance we may offer or accept.

4. *Accept God's forgiveness.* ("And we ourselves know and believe the love which God has for us." 1 John 4:16)

Believe it or not, for some people this is the toughest part. They'll admit they've done wrong, they'll express sorrow for it, they're willing to try and make amends – but they won't let themselves be

healed by accepting our Savior's mercy. They don't feel they've earned it, so they just keep beating up on themselves.

Had they lived in Noah's day, they might have told him, "You go on. We deserve to tread water!"

But refusing to accept forgiveness can be a sin in itself and a very grave one at that. It may be caused by a lot of leftover pride, which in turn can lead to resentment and ultimately despair. In any case, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to go to all the trouble of seeking to restore one's friendship with God, only to forswear it in the end.

Instead, during this Lenten season and Holy Week, let us resolve to complete the cycle, starting with step-one and carrying through with step-four. You can't turn back a flood with nothing but an umbrella. And by the same token, we all need more than "good intentions" to make the best of our opportunities for spiritual growth.

I pray that you and those you love may be "born again" this Lent, a time of "second chances" for us all. Moreover, may you share in the joy of our Savior's resurrection throughout the Easter season to come.

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