

Columnists

A Lenten call to reflect on covenants

By Father Albert Shamon
Sunday's readings: (R3) Mark 1:12-15; (R1) Genesis 9:8-15; (R2) 1 Peter 3:18-22.

The readings for Lent reflect the two-fold origin of the season. Lent was a time for final instruction of those preparing for baptism at the Easter vigil and a time of penance for sinners wishing to be reconciled to the Church on Holy Thursday.

The readings of the season, therefore, focus on two sacraments: baptism and reconciliation. The first readings of the Lenten period revolve around the concept of covenant. They recapitulate the five stages of salvation history.

The beginning of salvation, the covenant with Noah, is retold on the first Sunday of Lent. The beginning of the chosen people through the covenant with Abraham is the subject of the second Sunday's reading. The terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments to Moses, are stated on the third Sunday. The breaking of the covenant and the captivity in Babylon are recounted on the fourth Sunday, and the promise of a new covenant by Jeremiah is made on the fifth Sunday.

In the Gospel readings, meanwhile, we reflect on the baptismal covenant. On the first Sunday, we hear of the temptation of Jesus and recall our baptismal promise to renounce Satan.

The Transfiguration, retold on the second Sunday, symbolizes the change effected by the Holy Spirit and the grace given at baptism. On the third Sunday, we read of the cleansing of the temple, signifying the baptismal cleansing from original sin.

The discourse with Nicodemus (fourth Sunday) stresses the need to be born again and be lifted up to new life, and the parable of the grain of wheat (fifth Sunday) represents Christian life — a dying and rising again.

The second readings of the season point toward the given Sunday's first reading, Gospel or both, connecting the two and reinforcing the themes they emphasize.

On the first Sunday, for instance, the letter of Peter tells us that as the waters of the flood saved Noah from corruption by the wicked, as the waters of baptism save.

A Word for Sunday

St. Paul (second Sunday) likens God and Christ to Abraham and Isaac. As Abraham willingly gave his son, Isaac, so God gave His Son for love of us. As Isaac was spared, so Jesus was raised up to life. Both baptism and reconciliation are a dying and a rising.

On the third Sunday, we recall that the Jews wanted wondrous signs to authenticate the Messiah, and the Greeks wanted a great philosophical system explaining the universe. Jesus' death on the cross disillusioned them. Yet the Ten Commandments gave the world words to live by, and the resurrection of Jesus, gave Jews the sign they were looking for. All that was needed was faith.

The epistle of the fourth Sunday points out that God, rich in mercy, has given sinful mankind great hope: all can be lifted up to new life through baptism and the sacrament of reconciliation.

And the Letter to the Hebrews (fifth Sunday) presents Jesus as our High Priest. His death established a new covenant; His resurrection established a new life.

One of the age-long practices of Lent is fasting. At Medjugorje, Our Lady has called us to practice this forgotten act of religion on Wednesdays and Fridays. Why not this Lent?

More graves are dug by knives and forks than by auto accidents. Dieting is more strenuous and far less beneficial than fasting.

Resolve, then, to fast this Lent two days a week! Fast not to judge others as the Pharisees did. Fast not to be seen by men. Fast to become more open to God and to others; to atone for past sins; to make up for the sins of others; and to gain strength against future temptations.

Jesus calls His first two followers

By Cindy Bassett
"Has anyone seen Simon Peter?" the young man called out as he ran along the beach. Although it was still the middle of the night, the area was already crowded with fishermen casting off into the Sea of Galilee.

In his haste, Andrew nearly collided with his friend James. "Oh, good morning, James," Andrew said as he gasped for breath. "Have you seen my brother today?"

"Out there," James said, gesturing toward the sea. "Simon has been out fishing all night. He is not a very patient man, I'm afraid. And from the looks of his empty boat, I don't think his mood will have improved much when he gets back to shore."

Andrew waded out into the shallow water as his brother approached the shore. Simon Peter's face was tired and drawn with discouragement.

"Nothing, brother?" Andrew asked. "I thought we moved to Capernaum to start a business," Peter said, shooting Andrew a gruff look. "If I had any idea it would be like this, I would have stayed in Bethsaida."

"I'm sorry," Andrew replied, looking downcast.

Simon Peter's moods were as changeable as the weather on the Sea of Galilee. Seeing his brother's remorse, he immediately softened. "Andrew," he said gently, "I was worried about you. Where have you been for the past two days?"

"I have the most wonderful news!" Andrew cried, his face brightening. "Phillip and I have found the Messiah!"

Simon Peter's expression again changed, but this time, he checked himself before responding. Despite all his brother's crazy ideas, Simon Peter loved Andrew. "Andrew, the last I knew, you were a devoted follower of John the Baptist. Your loyalty to your causes cannot be very strong," Simon Peter chided.

"John the Baptist himself called Jesus the Messiah!" Andrew continued. "John told Phillip and me about a miracle that happened when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. Just after John poured water on Jesus, a dove came from out of nowhere and rested on Jesus. And from the sky, a voice said: 'This is my Son; I am well pleased with Him.' Anyway,

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for the past two days, I've been talking this to Jesus. I've never met anyone like Him!"

"Andrew, you are entitled to your beliefs, but if it's OK with you, I'm going home to get some sleep," Simon Peter said as he turned to leave.

Just then, Simon Peter noticed a man in the distance watching them. "That's him! That's Jesus!" Andrew said as the man approached.

"It is true that you had no luck fishing last night," Jesus said. "But allow me to go with you and your brother out into the sea where the water is deeper. That is where you should lower your nets."

Simon Peter was in no mood for a fishing lesson, but something in this man's manner that changed his mind. "Sir," he replied, "I've been at my work for many long hours with nothing to show for it. But, if you say so, I will try again."

Together, the three of them cast off into the Sea of Galilee. No sooner had the net been lowered than it was filled to the breaking point. The boat nearly sank with the size of the catch as they made their way back to shore.

But, before they had landed, Peter had already fallen on his knees before Jesus. "Forgive me for my unbelief," he asked humbly. "You must leave us. I am too much of a sinner for you to have around!"

"From now on, you will be known as Peter, the rock," Jesus said, smiling. "And upon this rock, I shall build my church." Then, seeing Peter's worried expression, Jesus added, "Do not be afraid. Follow me, for I will make you fishermen for the souls of men."

Peter and Andrew became two of Jesus' first followers.

Scripture reference: Luke 5:1-10; John 1:29-43.

Meditation for Lent: How can I be a better follower of Jesus?

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