

**First Sunday of Lent, Year B**  
**February 18, 2018**  
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Every year, on the first Sunday of Lent, we hear about the temptation of Christ in the desert. This year it's from Mark, and, as usual, Mark is brief and to the point. But because we hear none of the details about the temptation, we might notice instead the sequence of events. Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, a symbol of repentance. Then he went into the desert for forty days. Then, once he had rebuked Satan by throwing his temptations back into his face, Jesus began his public ministry, picking up where John the Baptist left off.

“This is the time of fulfillment.” What was Jesus fulfilling? God's promise to redeem and save the human race, faithful to His purpose in creating us.

“The Kingdom of God is at hand.” What is the Kingdom of God? It is that purpose fulfilled-- us fully alive, sharing God's joy, starting here and continuing forever.

“Repent and believe in the gospel.” The gospel is the good news that God's Kingdom is breaking into this world, where so many are captive in so many ways to the lies and empty promises of the evil one. It's the good news that anyone can tap into God's life and begin to live in His kingdom here and now.

The Kingdom being at hand does not mean that this world is about to blossom into that painless utopia we have longed for ever since we lost our place in the garden. This world will continue to be the arena where the contest for souls is battled out. As long as this world endures the weeds will flourish among the wheat. But don't be scandalized at this. Jesus said that his kingdom is not of this world. But it has broken into this world and is leading the captives out, restoring them to God, restoring them to themselves. Repentance, rejecting sin and death, is necessary to live in the Kingdom of God, and so find our fulfillment.

The idea of fulfillment shows up in our readings today. We see the Old Testament prefigurement, the flood, fulfilled in the sacrament of Baptism. The flood drowned out evil on the earth so that there could be a new beginning of goodness. The flood waters meant both death and life. And so, it is with baptism. Going into the water is putting to death the old self that is alienated from God. Coming out of the water is rising with Christ to a new life, made possible by grace.

Peter, in his epistle, calls baptism an appeal to God for a clear conscience. The word “appeal” can also be translated “pledge”. Baptism is a pledge to God for a clear conscience. In other words, baptism, by water and the Holy Spirit received in faith,

forgives all sin, clearing our conscience; but it is also a pledge to live the new life into which we have been reborn.

And, let's admit, it is a pledge that we sometimes don't live up to, which means we can get discouraged. We don't notice our own lives being transformed and wonder if all the grace talk is for real. So, what's really going on?

Well, it might be that we aren't turning our lives over completely to God's grace. We may be living with a divided heart, trying to keep a foot in each kingdom, that of darkness and that of light.

But then again it might be that we just aren't noticing the progress we have in fact been making. A soul making progress toward God becomes more sensitive to its failures. When we don't love God at all we don't notice our sins. When we start to love Him we repent of big, gross, ugly sins. When we love God a lot, we are appalled by even slight failures to love Him completely. So, don't be discouraged. Remember the bumper sticker: "Be patient. God isn't finished with me yet."

Trust the mercy that gave you new life in baptism, and trust the mercy that restores it in Reconciliation, and trust the mercy that deepens and strengthens the new life in the Eucharist. Trust the grace of God and its power to transform you and pledge yourself to keep your conscience clear and strong.

Besides doubting the Kingdom of God because of our personal failures, we can doubt it when we look at the state of the world. People look for causes when there's a school shooting, or a church shooting, or an open-air concert massacre. Where is this cult of blind violence coming from? What can we do to stop it? I don't doubt that there are practical measures that can help, but we should not take these eruptions of evil as proof that God is helpless or useless. Did we see evidence of the evil one when a disturbed young man shot into crowds of students? Well, we also saw evidence of the Kingdom of God when teachers took bullets to save their students.

Don't be discouraged by the state of the world, by the slow-motion cultural collapse that seems to be happening around us. This world is the arena where the contest for souls is being battled out, so our hopes are not ultimately lodged in this world. We know who will win in the end: The One who has already won because he defeated the tempter, laid down his life for his friends, and rose again. Christ has already won the victory, and he reigns at the right hand of the Father with authorities and powers subject to him, and he will return to judge the living and the dead.

The victory is already won, and it can be ours, starting now in our personal lives in the

communities of love that we can build together, and eventually at the end of time when Christ returns. In either case, personally or historically, it is just a matter of time. Let us use the time well.