

2024 Lent 1B

Six weeks ago, I was very annoyed that we had a snow day on the first Sunday after Epiphany. I was looking forward to talking about baptism—Jesus’ in particular but all of ours as well. I was going to point out that there are no stories of sweet baby Jesus in the Gospel of Mark—we jump right into the deep end. A few verses about John the Baptist preparing the way and then, BOOM! Chapter 1, verse 9, Jesus is in the water, and the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit descends, and a voice from heaven declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased”...what a dramatic way to make an entrance, Jesus!

I was looking forward to using it as a springboard to a congregation-wide review of our baptismal covenant, with encouragement to look at the ways in which you live out those promises day-to-day, bearing the light of Christ into the world. I was even going to extend the invitation to anyone who had not been baptized and wanted to be to speak to me so we could begin the conversation.

I love baptisms, I love the baptismal covenant, I love encouraging all of you to see it as a way of life. A rule of life, as our monastic siblings in Christ would say.

And then it snowed.

NOT the water I was looking forward to.

So imagine my delight, a couple of weeks ago, when I was reading through today's Gospel passage, and discovered I would get another crack at it! One of the few times in my life when I am grateful that the lectionary yanks us back and forth in the Jesus timeline!

Maybe this is why I'm not as gloomy about the beginning of Lent this year. I am seeing it through the lens of baptism. Instead of a dusty, ashen beginning, I am seeing the next six weeks through the water and light of our baptismal covenant.

That's what Lent was originally for, actually. It was, to quote the invitation to a holy Lent, "*a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.*"

It was the final six weeks of a three-year-long course of preparation. Baptism would occur at sunrise on Easter morning, so that every Christian had a memory of being resurrected into new life along with Jesus.

The invitation goes on to say:

It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the

Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

It was a chance for everyone to walk with those soon-to-be-Christians and remember their own journey. To acknowledge the ways in which they had grown lax. It invited everyone to a new start.

Lent was not meant to be gloomy.

In fact, the first Sunday in Lent, year B, begins with a rainbow. That is about as un-gloomy as you can get!

What makes a rainbow? Water and light in the right combination. The waters of baptism and the light of Christ, shining in and through us into the world. Light broken into the spectrum, to remind us that God doesn't want cookie-cutter Christians, each exactly alike. God wants—God *needs*—us to be different hues, working in tandem.

Last week we heard the story of the Transfiguration, how the disciples caught a glimpse of that light in full force, and it was too much for them. It was blinding. Overwhelming. Fear-inducing.

So maybe Lent isn't meant to be a time for beating ourselves up for being incapable of carrying the full weight of that light. Rather, it's a time for allowing ourselves to acknowledge our imperfections, our limitations, and focus instead on what we can do to allow Christ's light to shine through us, in whatever colors it comes.

This is usually the point in which I reel off the activities of "a holy Lent": self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy word. All excellent ways to observe Lent—as long as we understand what they are meant to do.

They are not meant to earn us extra holiness points, to be redeemed on Easter morning when we go back to the old ways.

They are meant to open our eyes to the work of God in this world, so that we can see the light of Christ in all its colors, shining out into a world which, frankly, can seem pretty gloomy most of the time.

So I am going to ask you to listen prayerfully as I read through the promises we make in our baptismal covenant. Ask yourself which one feels like an invitation to go deeper into your faith journey over the next six weeks.

Will you:

- continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
- cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?

Do you remember the response?

I will—with God's help.

May you be blessed, this Lent, to discover the colors of Christ's light that shine out most brightly in you.

Amen.