

Homily based on the readings from February 18, 2024 (Genesis 9.8-15; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.12-15)

There is no substance on earth that is more fundamental to human life – or which has a greater hold on the human imagination – than *water*. Not only do our bodies primarily consist of water, but water is *vital* to our daily existence in more ways than we can count. Living here on the shoreline, we are acutely aware of the *indispensability* of water to commerce, travel, and national defense – but also of the inherent danger it poses to our lives and property. It is no accident that water occupies a unique place within our collective consciousness – as a lifegiving force but also as an inescapable manifestation of nature’s untamable power.

Perhaps nowhere in human history does water play a more dramatic role than in the narrative whose conclusion we just heard: Noah and his family taking shelter on the Ark. Out of all the people living at the time, only eight survived the colossal flood: Noah and his three sons – Ham, Shem, and Japheth – along with all four of their wives. Despite the

unspeakable devastation, this event provided an unprecedented opportunity for rebirth and renewal. As we heard in today's reading, it also served as the catalyst for God's first covenantal relationship with human beings.

As with many accounts from the Old Testament, the story of Noah's Ark has multiple levels of meaning. On the one hand, the events speak for themselves – as milestones on humanity's journey from sin to salvation. On the other hand, the events anticipate the New Covenant that would come to be embodied by Jesus Christ. There is an ancient saying, quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that “the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New” (129). Not only do the narratives from the Old Testament foreshadow what would happen later, but they also provide human beings with the basic *vocabulary* for describing the saving power of Christ.

When we think about the imagery of water, of course, our minds should immediately turn to the Sacrament of Baptism. Even Saint Peter, writing during the Church's infancy, observed the connection between the waters of the flood and the waters of Baptism:

God patiently waited in the days of Noah  
during the building of the ark,  
in which a few persons, eight in all,  
were saved through water.

This prefigured baptism, which saves you now.

This same principle applies to numerous other events from the Old Testament. If you have ever attended a Baptism, you have heard the following words from the blessing of the baptismal water:

O God, whose Spirit in the first moments of the world's creation hovered over the waters, so that the very substance of water would even then take to itself the power to sanctify;

O God, who by the outpouring of the flood foreshadowed regeneration, so that from the mystery of one and the same element of water would come an end to vice and a beginning of virtue;

O God, who caused the children of Abraham to pass dry-shod through the Red Sea, so that the chosen people, set free from slavery to Pharaoh, would prefigure the people of the baptized.

The point is that, from the dawn of history onward, God was preparing his sons and daughters for the day when he would “graciously unseal ... the fountain of Baptism” to wash away our sins.

When we think about Lent, which started this past Wednesday, we often envision penance or fasting or abstinence. I do not mean to minimize those aspects of the season, but the *purpose* of Lent is actually *preparation* – preparation for the mysteries of Easter, to be sure, but more specifically preparation for *Baptism*. In fact, we can view the forty days of Lent as a microcosm of the *millennia* God spent readying human beings to receive the sacrament.

In the earliest days of the Church, Easter was always the day when new converts would be initiated into the fullness of Christian life. That tradition is still very much a part of modern-day Catholicism. Our candidates and catechumens in RCIA, at this very moment, are looking forward to receiving the Sacraments of Initiation at our own Easter Vigil. In fact, they [are participating/participated] in two important milestones this weekend: the Rite of Sending on Sunday morning [here] at Our Lady of Lourdes and the Rite of Election at the Cathedral in Norwich. Please continue to keep these individuals in your prayers, along with anyone else who is making the joyful journey toward Baptism.

I would be willing to wager, though, that most people here today received the Sacrament of Baptism years – if not decades – ago.

Regardless of how long it has been since our own baptism, we should *all* take the opportunity that Lent provides to prepare ourselves – not

necessarily to receive the sacrament, but to reaffirm our commitment to Jesus Christ and our membership in his Body, the Church.

Remember that God is calling every single one of us to eternal life. In today's Gospel, we heard Christ's first words after his own baptism:

“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent, and believe in the gospel.” The task is urgent. The clock is running. Whether we have forty days or forty minutes or forty years, each of us must be ready to stand face-to-face before our Risen Lord.

When we are presented with the final choice, will we partake of the living water – that quenches every thirst – or will we perish in the dry and barren desert? As always, pray that we have the wisdom and the strength to choose wisely.