

Genesis 7:11-18, 8:13, 18-19; 9:1, 3, 8-16  
1 Pet 3:13-21  
Ps 58 [Edited Version, Praying the Psalms, Merrill]  
Mk 12:12-15

## LENT: A TIME TO LET GO OF ILLUSION

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By Jane Via  
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First Sunday in Lent

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Lent, a time set aside from ordinary time to ponder the human condition in relation to the Sacred.

The readings for today may seem unconnected. One notes the verbal links: 40 days and 40 nights; “Now is the time”; water; fear. There are also thematic ties: repentance, transformation, new life, hope.

The ancient text of Genesis narrates a story of vast destruction and limited survival, a story possibly based in the collective human memory of an historical flood. The story explains how creature life survived. The concept of God it presents is based on the ancient experience of life and an ancient cosmology. It describes a God who creates, but also a God who repents of creation and destroys almost all of creation because of human failures, a God to fear. The God of Genesis is also an endearing God, who repents of destroying creation and promises to never again destroy the world by flood, a promise that does not extend to destruction by other means! God creates a divine note to Self about the promise: the rainbow will remind God not to inflict too much rain!!

Whether terrifying or endearing, this concept of God is no longer compatible with what we know of life on our planet. Science has explained the phenomena of weather to a considerable extent. There is scientific evidence that humans can negatively impact life on our planet, but also that non-human forces can impact life

on our planet apart from humans. We know that our planet, and life on our planet, experienced major changes before humans ever emerged. The Genesis story, however charming, reminds us that we need a new concept of God other than this ancient concept of a human like God who behaves like an angry, destructive child.

Merrill's psalm brings suggests we need a new anthropology, a new concept of the human being, consistent with contemporary experience, although the issues addressed in psalm 58 are perennial: leaders of nations who do not do what is right, instead seeking personal power and fame; fear - in this case, not of God – but of human beings and our propensity for destruction; crisis points when human beings must act to transform themselves and potentially save their civilization or world; and the possibility of hope, when humans recognize the illusion of separateness of life forms, the transformative power of cooperation over competition and of choosing peace and integrity.

The author of the essay 1 Peter offers concrete counsel applicable millennia later, urging Christians to not fear what God's enemies fear; to speak up and out, though with gentleness and respect, to explain why Christians live in hope; to suffer for doing good rather than for doing evil and, thereby, live and die as Jesus did. The writer reminds the 1<sup>st</sup> century audience that transformation by the Spirit, which Jesus experienced in death, is available to all who die in the spirit.

The gospel suggests that even Jesus needed time to retreat, to reflect on his life, to face the evil within. In his desert experience, Jesus chose good over evil within and, from the experience, emerged prepared to engage the evil in the world: mental illness, chronic illness and other disease, gender discrimination, death, spiritual alienation; the abuse of believers by religious institutions; the inability of political institutions to provide adequately for the common good.

The themes come together. In Genesis, God repents of creation, then repents of destroying creation. The psalm calls us to heightened consciousness in which

we set aside or repent of illusions. The writer of 1 Peter calls us to avoid the need for repentance by choosing to suffer for the good, rather than for harm humans do to ourselves, others and our planet. Each ancient writer, directly or indirectly, speaks of “the time [that] has come”, described by Jesus as a time to repent and believe in the good news because the kin-dom of God is at hand. It’s near; it’s here,

Today’s readings invite us to ponder our part in the evils of our time, to ponder our fears and how we might transform them, and to ponder our individual and collective choices – on a planetary scale. They invite us to ask, “From what are we called to repent these 40 days and 40 nights?” They invite us to set aside our illusions about God and our illusions about humanity. They suggest we repent from our failure to live in responsible harmony with all life on our planet; that we repent of our human-centered vision of life, of our elevation of human life over other life forms, of our presumption that humans rightfully dominate all other life forms regardless of the planetary impact. Likewise, the readings invite us to ask, “To what are we called when we do repent?” They invite us to recognize anthropocentrism as a delusion which flows from the illusion of the separateness of life forms. They invite us to revise and expand our consciousness, to embrace the implications of contemporary science in a manner consistent with the gospel, and to take seriously the implications of particle theory that all life forms are ultimately one.

This Lent, if we focus only on setting aside these illusions and expanding our consciousness, we may find enlarged our capacity to choose our suffering, our capacity to choose suffering that arises from the good we do, rather than the harm we inflict; and we may find, thereby, we have transformed at least some of our fears with Love.