**Reflection on the Sunday Readings**

**February 18, 2018 – First Sunday of Lent**

**Genesis 9: 8-15 Psalm 25: 4-9 1 Peter 3: 18-22**

**Mark 1: 12-15**

Today is the First Sunday of Lent. The Season of Lent is the main penitential season in the liturgical year and commemorates the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert devoting himself to fasting and prayer. The Forty Days of Lent began just a few days ago with Ash Wednesday (observed with the placing of ashes on our forehead, reminding us of our mortality and calling us to repentance) and ends with the celebration of the Easter Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil). Visually, Lent is observed by the lack of flowers or other decorations in the church and the wearing of purple vestments by the priest and deacon at mass (except for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, when rose colored vestments may be worn). The Sunday liturgies are also marked by a greater simplicity: The Gloria is neither said nor sung, and the traditional *Alleluia* at the Gospel Acclamation is replaced by the less celebratory, *Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ, King of endless glory.* The Gospel readings in particular focus on the life and ministry of Jesus as the fulfillment of messianic prophecy as he journeys to Jerusalem and his Paschal Sacrifice.

*“The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God,” ‘This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.’”*

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark is one of the briefest of all in the lectionary; yet, in the evangelist’s direct style, it recounts two of the most significant events in the life of Our Lord: Jesus’ temptation in the desert, and his proclamation of the kingdom of God. With these two connected events, Jesus begins his public ministry, ushering in a new era in the life of humanity. In Christ, the prophecies have been fulfilled; he is the realization of the promise made by God in fidelity to his loving covenant with man. The coming of the Savior in the person of Jesus is prefigured in the reading from Genesis, whereby God established his covenant with Noah and his descendants. As we heard in the first Letter of Saint Peter: *Beloved: Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the Spirit.”*

As the Season of Lent is a time of penance and solemn preparation for the joyful celebration of Easter, it is marked by days of fasting and abstinence from meat (Ash Wednesday and Good Friday), and abstinence on all other Fridays. Traditionally, Catholics refrain from indulging in certain pleasures or participate in additional acts of prayer, service, and charity as part of their preparation for Easter. One particular way to enter more fully into the spirit of Lent is to participate in the *Stations of the Cross*, held in our parish at 7:00pm each Friday during Lent. The *Stations,* a traditional Lenten devotion, are in essence a 14-step, mini-pilgrimage recalling the journey of Our Lord to Calvary beginning with his condemnation and culminating with the laying of the body of the Lord in the tomb. Catholics are long familiar with this devotion. Since my ordination to the diaconate, I have been privileged to lead the congregation in praying the *Stations of the Cross* on many of the Fridays in Lent; personally, I find the devotion to be a profound form of prayer, allowing me (and hopefully others) to enter into a deep meditation on the great sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The devotion lasts no longer than 30 minutes, but is a wonderful way to deepen our spiritual journey with the Lord as he enters into his Paschal Sacrifice.

Deacon Steven K. Szmutko