

1st Sunday of Lent: Yr. B – 2021
[Gn 9:8-15 • 1 Pt 3:18-22 • Mk 1:12-15]

On July 19th, 1969, John Fairfax became the first person to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean. He rowed from the Canary Islands to Florida – a distance of almost 4,000 miles. He used a self-righting and self-bailing boat called the Britannia. He completed the journey in 6 months. Fairfax received a message of congratulations from the crew of Apollo 11 who had walked on the Moon the day after he had completed his voyage. The astronauts said, *“Yours, however, was the accomplishment of one resourceful individual, while ours depended upon the help of thousands of dedicated workers ... As fellow explorers, we salute you on this great occasion.”*

Fairfax’s successful journey was an extraordinary accomplishment, but certainly not the ordinary way people cross the Atlantic Ocean safely – we use ships and planes instead. In like manner, some souls try to brave the stormy waters of life solo, verses getting into the safety of the Bark of Peter that we call the Church. Early Christians saw the Church as a lifeboat that carried souls over the stormy seas to the safe shores of salvation. This Lent I challenge you to not only practice your faith with a greater intensity and purpose, but bring a friend to board this boat, to try Church again.

Why is it important to board the boat of the Church? St. John Henry Newman, a convert to Catholicism, said one of the marks of a healthy religion is its power of assimilation. In other words, religion must take in certain healthy aspects of the world, but resist what would lead it astray from God. Assimilation is the process every living being uses. As humans, our largest organ, the skin, keeps out most of the harmful things of the world, while our mouth takes in nutrients and our lungs breathe in the air – the necessities of life. But if we take in certain bacteria or viruses or no longer take in nutrients, we die and our body decays or returns to the world. Back to the analogy of the Church being a boat, we spring a leak and the boat becomes part of the sea.

With this in mind look at our first reading from Genesis about God working to save creation by having it board a great boat called Noah’s Ark. Think of the great flood not as God’s retribution, but rather the natural consequences of letting in every harmful thing of the world – power, pleasure, honor and wealth. The people of Noah’s time had morally drowned. Noah gathered his family and God’s animals into a boat to get them to safety. He was building the ark in the middle of the desert and he must have seemed foolish to his neighbors and even his family and friends. When we are first inviting people to board the boat or try Church again we will seem just as foolish as Noah. But inside the ark, creation was safe and journeyed to dry ground.

In our Gospel, Jesus was tested in the desert by the Devil. St. Mark added a small detail that is not in Matthew or Luke’s versions of this story – that Jesus was with the angels and animals. In other words, all of God’s creation is on display – humanity, divinity, animals and angels and they are going through the storm of temptation over 40 days. What emerges after the storm is Jesus grew in strength to reshape creation in the image and likeness of God again. Noah’s ark did the same, protecting God’s creation during the 40 days of rain and the stormy waters.

When the ark encountered dry land, Noah opened the hatch to let the life out and replenish the land. It is inside the boat of the Church that God is getting us safely to the shores of salvation. We buck at boarding the boat at first because we want to row solo, but the Church is the place we go to get direction, not give direction. Through the Mass, sacraments and unchanging teachings, we are reoriented to God, healed of our worldly wounds, we can rest from rowing, and find communion with other people in God’s creation.

Pope Francis commented, our biggest hang up to inviting people back to the Church is that we evangelize like we have just returned from a funeral. If Noah had not promised a greater joy by getting into the ark than he probably would have sailed alone. The Pope continued, *“[M]ay the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ [themselves].”*