**LENT 1B 2021 Sftc**

Our first reading today talks about the covenant that God offered His people through Noah, after the flood.

The idea of "covenant" may not be too familiar to us, but it's foundational in our relationship with God.

At every Mass we talk about the "new and eternal covenant" that was sealed with the blood of Christ.

One of our Eucharistic Prayers says that "Again and again... (God) offered them covenants"

before the time of Christ.

We might be more familiar with the term contract than covenant, so its a good point of comparison.

A contract specifies the minimum that one party will do for the other,

but only if the other party does certain things in return. A contract ends when both have met the requirements.

For example, you agree to pay a certain price for someone to paint your house.

Once they do, and you pay them, the contract is satisfied and you go your separate ways.

A covenant is much more. It's not about the minimum that I have to do, nor does it have a limited timeframe.

A covenant is a relationship, an offering of myself for the good of the other or for some greater good.

The most familiar example for most of us is the marriage covenant, which the Church honors very highly.

In fact, scripture uses marriage as an image of the "new and eternal covenant" offered to us in Christ Jesus.

Marriage is not merely a contract, but a full sharing of life and love which holds nothing back.

It has to be "all in" if it's to bear fruit. That's what a covenant is all about.

Our covenant in Christ is clearly symbolized by His cross, which shows in very stark reality that He's "all in."

It shows how completely He offers Himself for us so that we might have abundant life.

And that's not just in the future, but here and now as well.

We just heard Him say, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand."

We can have "the freedom of the children of God" here and now.

We can be free from fear of dying, here and now.

We can have no anxiety about what people think of us or what our future might hold, here and now.

That's the "new and eternal covenant" He offers us. Sounds like a pretty good deal to me!

What would we be willing to do in order to enter into that quality of life?

Jesus gives us the recipe in the very next line: "Repent and believe in the gospel."

So, let's unpack those two steps a little bit.

To repent is to turn away, but also to turn toward something better.

To turn away from sin because it leads us away from God's abundant life,

robs us of our freedom in so many ways.

To turn away from selfishness and pride because it restricts the flow of God's grace,

which is the source of lasting peace and joy.

Now this turning away is not easy, that's for sure. But we don't need to do it on our own.

Prayer is a powerful weapon, but we need to be really honest in our prayer.

Sure, God knows our sins already. But He never forces His love on us.

Acknowledging our sins to God opens us to that flow of grace and mercy.

Ask for His help in resisting temptations. Jesus said in another place, "Knock, and the door will be opened."

Not just a door, but a floodgate of life-giving water.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is so powerful because it gives flesh to that saving encounter with Christ.

He gave us this sacrament because we are body and soul joined together in one being, just as He is.

He knows we experience things most fully when it involves both dimensions, body and spirit.

Being really honest in confession is so important. There's nothing to fear:

God already knows, and the priest has heard 'em all anyway!

Seriously, any priest who's a good confessor is painfully aware of his own sinfulness and human weakness.

We're in this together.

Now, repentance was not a new theme at the time of Jesus.

It’s all throughout the Old Testament and in the preaching of John the Baptist, just prior to our Gospel today.

But Jesus adds that other dimension of turning toward something: "Repent and believe in the gospel."

He's not talking about the four 'Gospels' that we read in the bible - they weren't written yet.

He's talking about the good news they contain: that God loves us so greatly,

and will go to astonishing lengths to share His Divine Life with us;

that He offers us a "new and eternal covenant" in Christ - a relationship that is life giving and never ending.

That relationship is not something we just choose once and then wait 'til the end and collect our prize.

It has to be affirmed over and over again in our lives.

Lent is a time of special focus, a time to take a deeper look at this 'turning away' and 'turning toward.'

Jesus went into the desert for forty days and experienced temptation.

What are those temptations that give us the most trouble in our own lives?

What would turning away from those things look like in our lives?

What habits or patterns will I need to change - and am I willing to do it?

Have I ever truly tried to give them over to God?

It's so easy to go through Lent each year, and not find ourselves any closer to the Lord than we were before.

We give up things, or we pray a little more, or we put money in the Rice Bowl.

These things we should do, but do they bring about lasting change in our lives?

Lent is a time to practice those things that we should be doing all year round,

to strengthen those habits which draw us closer to God.

But it needs to penetrate deeply, or just a few weeks after Easter we'll be right back where we started.

Jesus challenges us to go "all in" - just as He did. He challenges us to a radical change of heart.

He said you don't put new wine in old wineskins because they won't stretch out when the wine ferments.

New wine calls for new wineskins.

The Prophet Joel (Joel 2:12-13) heard God saying, "Return to me with all your heart. Tear open your heart, not your garments." People would tear open their clothing as a sign of repentance or sorrow,

but God calls us to go deeper. We need to allow the Lord to give us a new heart, again and again.

How will I use this season of Lent to shape my heart,

to open it more and more to His Divine Life?