

## **Standing Firm** ***Believing Truth Is a Choice***

Texts: Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22 (Series B, 1 Sunday in Lent) Ps. 25:1-10

Mark 1:9-15

*As soon as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw heaven opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you."*

### Prayer

The story was told about a bunch of hooligans in a small town in Scotland who decided to play a practical joke on their local drunkard. These hooligans seized the drunk, one night, after he had been drinking heavily and threw him into a shallow grave overnight. The drunk was unaware of where he was or what was happening, only to be awakened at noon by the town's only Church bell. The loud noise woke him up from his slumber, and he crawled out of the grave. Looking around and seeing nobody, he dusted off some dirt from his clothes and exclaimed, *Holy Mary, mother of God, I can't believe this; I am the only one resurrected.*

The Lenten season is once again upon us. Lent is intended to revive the Christian ancient practice of meditation to help us think, ponder, reflect, discuss, and certainly pray about the meaning of the suffering and the death of Jesus Christ.

How firm are we? No need to answer. It is a thought I would like to leave with you, as we all journey through this Lenten season. Today's meditation is entitled "*Standing Firm, Believing Truth Is A Choice.*" Have you ever watched trees at the height of a severe storm? There are those that sway back and forth, bending under the force of wind. The wind howls through their branches shaking them so violently that you are sure that they will be ripped off at any moment. You are quite certain that the tree will be such a wreck after the storm with leaves stripped off and branches broken and lying on the ground. We expect that the whole tree might be up-rooted and tossed on its side. But somehow, the tree manages to withstand the pulling and jerking of the wind and, apart from the loss of a few leaves, it stands straight and tall when it's all over. On the other hand, there are other trees of similar size whose branches come crashing down under the strain of the wind.

In 1977, I spent three months studying in Lausanne, Switzerland, at a school of evangelism. The school was situated in the country, just outside the city of Lausanne. A storm came through the region one late fall. When we woke the next morning, several trees were down; they succumbed to the strong wind that came through the region. Some simply snapped like a twig, while others stood firm. 'Standing Firm' is the theme of this meditation.

Now let us explore the theme of the day in the light of Faith, as we journey through Lent. Faith is the biblical response to the truth, and believing truth is a choice. Faith is something we decide to have, not something we feel like having. Believing the truth doesn't make it true; it's true, so we believe it. Even within Christianity, some Christian groups have distorted the truth by saying that we create *reality* through what we believe. We can't create *reality*; we can only respond to *reality*.

I realize there is a botanical explanation for why trees respond differently to the wind. But they provide an excellent illustration of life itself and the nature of the Christian faith. Both trees experienced the same adversity of neck-breaking wind. Both are tempted to allow their limbs to snap off. Some give in and lose a lot of their branches or are completely destroyed. Others remain flexible and withstand the temptation. Their limbs remain connected to the trunk of the tree.

Faith must have an object. It's not the idea that we merely "believe" that counts; it's what or who we believe in that counts. Everybody believes in something, and everybody walks by faith according to what he or she believes. But if what we believe isn't true, then how we live won't be right. Therefore, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Our faith is only as great as our knowledge of the object of our faith. If we have little knowledge of God and His Word, it will reflect on our experiences, having little faith or no faith.

In today's gospel, Jesus is baptized and, as soon as he comes out of the water, the heavens open, and the Spirit descends on him like a dove. The voice of God declares, "*You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you.*" Jesus Christ is not basically a pantheistic individual who gradually ascended to a perfect development of his potentials as divine. No, Jesus was inaugurated at his baptism as the Son of the living God, the Saviour of the world. He did not go through a circle of developments to be the Saviour; for in him and through him we have our being.

Mark continues by saying that, immediately, the same Spirit who descended on him in baptism *made him go into the desert*, a place of hostility. One moment, Jesus is proclaimed the beloved Son of God and, the next, thrown out into the harshness of the wilderness. This reminds us of the sudden shifts that occur in our life. One moment, we are perfectly healthy, composed, basking in acceptance, and, the next moment, we find ourselves in miserable loneliness in a confusing wilderness where everything that seemed so certain has now come apart. It is out there in the wilderness that Satan tempts Jesus.

The temptation Jesus faced was to break away from his Father in heaven. The temptation was to see these forty days of testing as a sign that his Father in heaven no longer loved him or, if he did, then was playing games with him. The temptation was to give up the whole 'Son of God' idea and go back to being a carpenter in Nazareth. But Jesus did not break away, He stood firm. Despite the ruggedness and harshness of the wilderness; despite the tantalizing rational arguments Satan offered him; despite the menace of hungry wild beasts that saw Jesus as dinner; despite the fact that Jesus faced all of this for forty days and nights, Jesus did not snap. He remained obedient to his Father in heaven.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness sets the stage for everything that follows. Throughout his ministry and even in his suffering and death, he remains connected with his Father in heaven. Jesus was *not* like the trees succumbing to the storm, snapping off, and crashing to the ground. Instead, he was like those trees which were bent low by the force of the wind but remained firm until the storm was over.

In the world of investments, there is something called 'diversification of funds.' It simply means that you put your investments into different investment portfolios. It is unwise to put all of your eggs in one basket. This makes a lot of sense in investments but it doesn't work in matters of faith. Believe me, I have met quite a lot of people who have diversified their faith into several religious portfolios. Sounds strange but it is true.

Fifty years ago, when I met Jesus on my journey in search of the meaning of life, I put all of my faith in him; I put all of my eggs in one basket. I staked all that I had, then and now, on him. Because, to me, there is no other Saviour, other than the one declared by God through the pages of the Bible and the testimonies of the prophets and apostles. Thus, for me, the search is over, When Jesus found me, he gave me life and meaning.

*In his confession, St. Augustine says: "The thought of You stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises You, because You made us for Yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in You."*

For me, any attempt to live by faith, beyond what I absolutely know to be true, is presumptuous. If I only believe what I feel, I will be led through life by one emotional impulse after another. The path of truth begins with the truth of God's Word. Believe the truth and walk by faith according to what I believe, and then my feelings will line up with what I think and how I behave. This doesn't make me better than anybody else.

We can't decide for ourselves what we would like to believe and then believe it, expecting God to respond to our faith. God is under no obligation to man or woman in that regard. There is no way we can cleverly word a prayer in such a way that God must answer it. Satan uses the storms that come our way in life to break us away from God; when things aren't going well for us, to break us away from God. Satan uses these situations to pry a wedge between God and us – maybe an ongoing illness, a sudden death, a disagreement with someone in the congregation or a family breakup.

When we find ourselves in some unknown and confusing wilderness, it is all too tempting to break away from God completely. But the question is this: When the storm finally lifts, will you and I be lying on the ground like dead wood, or will you and I be straight and tall and growing again? Jesus was tempted. You and I are tempted. There is no sin in being tempted. What matters is how we handle the temptation. And the truth is that we can handle temptation infinitely better if we remain close to our Father in heaven who has already declared us to be his beloved sons or daughters in baptism. With God's strength as our strength, we can weather the storm.

Yes, Satan will tempt us to doubt God's love. He will tempt us to blame God for storms that pass through our life. He will tempt us to take God for granted, to slacken off as members of his church, to think that we have it made and don't really need God. He will tempt us to rely on human wisdom rather than on God's power. He will tempt us to believe that God isn't all that important, perhaps a little religion every now and then will be okay but not too much. He will tempt you to ignore his ways. And we will fall for his tricks many times because of our own choices.

This is why we have the Old Testament lesson today. The final word in the horrific story of the Flood is one about God's love for all people. As we tell our horrific stories of temptation and sin, we are reminded that our God is a forgiving and gracious God.

He has broken the power of Satan to drag us down. He has sent us his Son to be our Saviour. Jesus died for us to give us forgiveness, and it is that forgiveness from God himself that breaks Satan's stronghold over us and sets Jesus apart to be His hands and feet for others. As we enter this Lenten season, let's reflect on the power God has on our lives, change those things that need changing, and thank God that Satan doesn't have the last say. Jesus has won the victory. Thanks be to God. His love never ends.

**“Without *faith* it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them who diligently seek Him.”  
(Hebrews 11:6).**

### **Black History Month**

#### **Make melodies in your heart with these hymns:**

- Lift Every Voice and Sing # 841
- Be Thou My Vision # 793
- How Great Thou Art # 856

Let us pray: (prayer from National Bishop)

*Holy wisdom you are our vision, our heart and our light. Help us claim and use these gifts so that we may be brought closer to you and to our neighbours. You are our treasure and our inheritance; help us to give up vainly seeking other treasure, we pray in your wise and living name, Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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