

The First Sunday of Lent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 9:8-15
<i>Response</i>	All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 3:18-22
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:12-15

The first Sunday of Lent for the second reading of the Mass takes us to the first letter of St. Peter, chapter 3. And this is one of the most mysterious and also most controversial passages in 1 Peter, because it deals with the hotly debated issue of whether and when and how Jesus descended into Hell. Alright, so this is one of the articles of faith in the Apostles Creed — that Jesus descended into Hell, or literally in the Greek, into Hades — that many Christians, many non-Catholics, don't accept. They don't believe Jesus descended into Hell. Many Catholics who believe it don't necessarily understand it. What does that mean to say Jesus went to Hell? Usually we think of Hell as the realm of the damned. And also many interpreters of Scripture debate whether or not the New Testament ever speaks about Jesus' descent into Hell.

And so when that doctrine of Jesus' descent into Hell comes up, this passage in 1 Peter chapter 3 — the second reading for today on the first Sunday of Lent — is kind of the locus classicus, the classic passage or classic place in Scripture where the Fathers of the Church (some Fathers, as we'll see) point to a biblical foundation for that article of faith in the Apostles Creed.

So we're going to read it today and kind of talk about why it's here for the first Sunday of Lent. And then we'll also adjudicate the question of, "Does it actually

refer to Jesus' descent into Hell or to some other mystery of His Passion, Death, and Resurrection?"

So, without any further ado, 1 Peter chapter 3, verses 18-22 is the reading. This is what it says:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.¹

Okay, so before we get into the debate over exactly what this passage refers to (certain verses in it), the first thing we want to say is just something that's really incontrovertible. Namely, if you look at the entire passage as a whole, one reason the Church probably chooses this for the first Sunday of Lent is because it's a summary statement of what we refer to as the Paschal Mystery — the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus into Heaven. That's what we are preparing for during the Lenten season. The Lenten season is a 40-day preparation for the liturgical commemoration and celebration of Jesus' Passion, Death, Resurrection, and then of course in Easter, we'll enter into the Ascension period as well.

So that focus on the Passion and Death of Jesus is one of the reasons this passage is chosen. And as I've mentioned in other videos, during the Lenten season, the second reading is not chosen according to a principle of semi-continuous reading

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

— like during Ordinary Time where we're working through one of the letters of Paul, for example.

But during Lent, the second reading is chosen for thematic reasons. In other words, it's going to be tied more to the season itself. And in this case, that's what seems to be happening here. For thematic reasons, the theme of Passion and Death (and then of course Resurrection) the Church has chosen to put this passage, famous passage from 1 Peter, before our eyes to prepare us at the very beginning of the Lenten season.

Alright, so if you look there, you'll see the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension are all mentioned in those verses. For it begins with:

...Christ also died for sins once for all...

Chapter 3, verse 18. And then if you skip down to verse 21, it says:

...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God...

That's the Ascension. So you got the Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension — that's the great Paschal Mystery, and that's what this passage is all about. And what Peter is saying here — again, this is incontrovertible — is that the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Passion, Death, and Resurrection in some way corresponds to Baptism. It's tied to the Sacrament of Baptism, which now saves you:

...not as a removal of dirt from the body...

Not as an exterior rite only:

...but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...

So again, during the Lenten season — especially for people who are catechumens — they aren't just preparing to celebrate Easter. They're preparing to receive the Sacrament of Baptism, as well as the Sacraments of Holy Communion and

ordinarily of Confirmation as well — the Sacraments of Initiation. So it's also fitting that the Church would put here before us 1 Peter's teaching on the correlation between the Paschal Mystery and the Sacrament (the principle Sacrament) of Initiation, which is the Sacrament of Baptism.

And I can't help but pointing out as we look at that: notice the strength of the language of the New Testament about Baptism. It's not *just* an outward sign of inward repentance — although it's certainly that. But it's efficacious. It performs what it signifies. Peter says:

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you... (1 Peter 3:21a)

Now that's striking, right? A lot of Catholics will be asked a question — a very common experience, especially in predominantly Protestant countries — “Have you been saved?” And what's usually meant by that question from our evangelical Protestant brothers and sisters is, “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?”...as an adult with a conscious conversion experience or something like that. But biblically speaking, the language of salvation is not just tied to the confession of faith in Jesus — although it certainly is, like in Romans 10:

For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. (Romans 10:10)

So that's true, but New Testament also says that the Sacrament (doesn't call it that but...) ... the Rite of Baptism is salvific. It has saving power. And many non-Catholic Christians — you'd never hear a sermon on how Baptism saves you. It's always “you're saved by faith” — not by the Sacrament. Well, that's not Scriptural. According to Scripture, you're saved by faith, absolutely, but you're also saved by the Sacrament. The grace of the Sacrament is salvific, and a lot of times people don't see it as easily, because it's “hidden” in 1 Peter chapter 3. So whereas the letters of Paul are widely read in non-Catholic circles, the so-called Catholic epistles of 1 Peter and 1 John and James are less widely read. They receive less attention.

I always like to joke that 1 Peter is the first papal encyclical, and it suffers the fate of many other papal encyclicals — namely, nobody ever reads it. So we don't want to let that happen here. This is very important to understand, that Baptism is salvific. And I think that's another reason the Church gives us this text on the first Sunday of Lent as we prepare not just for receiving Baptism (if we're a catechumen), but if we are already members of the Body of Christ for renewing our Baptismal vows at the Easter Vigil. That's going to be something, if we attend the Easter Vigil, we renew our Baptismal vows. So this is a season of preparation for the graces of Baptism, either to be unleashed in the Sacrament or to be renewed through the Easter Liturgy...through the Easter Vigil.

Alright, so that's kind of the basic meaning of the passage for today. Alright, what about this line, though? What about this whole thing of Jesus:

...being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison...

What does that refer to? Well, this is one of those classic examples of a Scriptural text in which there is difficulty and obscurity, and there's debate about how to interpret it between faithful Catholic interpreters, as well as between saints and various Church Fathers. So there are going to be certain texts where different opinions will be given by different Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and where the Church doesn't have any infallible binding interpretation...or if She does, She may have given it after some of the saints put forward their opinions.

So what I want to do briefly is just give you an overview of the three major options about how to interpret this passage from 1 Peter chapter 3 and what it might be referring to. And then I'll tell you what I think.

Alright, so let's begin. Option number one. One interpretation of this passage says that what 1 Peter 3 is describing is Christ's preincarnate preaching of the Word through the figure of Noah the prophet. So Christ preincarnate preaching. According to this view, if you look at the verses when 1 Peter says:

...he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

So here the emphasis falls on the idea of Christ preaching "in the Spirit, in the days of Noah." So according to this view, which is supported by two rather significant figures — Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. So these are the two greatest Doctors and Fathers of the Church in the west. Both Aquinas and Augustine took the view that what Peter is referring to here is Jesus preaching in the Spirit *before* the Incarnation, through the mouth of Noah.

So remember, although Jesus only takes flesh in time through the Incarnation, the Word who becomes flesh is eternal. And according to the Church Fathers, when you hear the voice of God in the Old Testament, we tend to just assume, "Well, that's the Father speaking." But actually, many Fathers of the Church would say, "No, it's the Word—the second person of the Trinity is the Word—of the Father. Whenever God speaks in the Old Testament, it's actually the preincarnate Son speaking His Word through the Spirit." That's a very common opinion.

So you might think: "Now where are they getting that from?" Well, if you look at 1 Peter 1:10-11, it says this:

The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory.

So according to the first chapter of 1 Peter, Peter speaks here of the Spirit of Christ speaking through the prophets to predict the sufferings of Christ. Think here of Isaiah chapter 53— very specific description of the future sufferings of this suffering servant. Well, according to 1 Peter 1, that is the....that's not just the Spirit of God that's inspiring Isaiah to see that, it's the Spirit of Christ. So verses like that led Augustine and Aquinas to say that when in 1 Peter 3 it says that Christ was:

...made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah...

What it means there is that the Spirit of Christ preached through Noah to Noah's generation — which remember, it was wicked and disobedient and who didn't listen to his preaching, calling them to repentance before the flood came.

Alright. The weakness of that interpretation is that it seems, if you look at the whole context of the reading for today (verses 18-22), the overall context seems to be the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ — His Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascension — not His preincarnate existence. So it seems to make that verse kind of leap out of the immediate context of His Passion, Death, and Resurrection and somehow go back to the preincarnate period of the Word. So it feels like it's wrenching the verse out of context, but it's a respected and venerable position held by two great Fathers and Doctors, Aquinas and Augustine. Alright, that's the first option.

The second option, which is much more popular today among modern commentators...according to this view, what 1 Peter 3 is describing is Christ's proclamation of victory to the fallen angels after His death. Ah, okay. So according to this view, when 1 Peter 3 says that Christ was:

...made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison...

It's actually referring to His bodily Resurrection made alive, and the spirits in prison are the wicked angels — the fallen angels. So according to this view, what Peter is describing here is Jesus journeying to the spiritual prison of the wicked angels, in order to proclaim His victory which He has accomplished over them through His Passion and His Death.

So where do they get this idea from? Well, according to this view, first of all, it's supported by early Jewish writings from the time of Jesus and Peter, such as 1 Enoch or the Book of Jubilees. These aren't in the Old Testament; they're in a body

of literature called the Pseudepigrapha. But they were widely read. In fact, the letter of Jude quotes 1 Enoch. It was a very popular book at the time of Jesus. Copies were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Anyway, so one argument in support of this is that there was a widespread Jewish belief that at the time of the flood of Noah — if you go back to Genesis chapter 6 — the culprits that led humanity into sin were these wicked angels. And in fact, in the Book of Enoch in particular, the sin of these angels was that they either took human form somehow, but they wed themselves to human women and had children (offspring) with them that were very wicked. They were giants, and they kind of corrupted the Earth... the offspring of these fallen angels corrupted the Earth.

Now you don't have to accept that theory to see the link between these mysterious figures in Genesis 6 called the sons of God who wed themselves to the daughters of men, and whose offspring were — you can at least say they were the great men. They were violent. And it appears to be a causal connection between the violence of those offspring and the violence that leads to the flood.

So in this view (which again, is very popular among scholars today) the idea is that when Jesus goes and preaches to the spirits in prison — spirits there means “angels.” And it means the wicked angels who led to the flood at the time of Noah. So this interpretation would make sense of the expression “the days of Noah,” as well as spirits as angels. And you'll see, for example, elsewhere in the New Testament, the language of spirit being used to apply to a wicked angel. Think here of the Gospels, where they said Jesus comes in the synagogue and the people respond:

With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.
(Mark 1:27b)

It's a Jewish term for a fallen angel, a wicked angel, an evil spirit. Okay. Now the weakness of this interpretation is...you can't see it as easily from this passage, but if you go a few verses down in 1 Peter chapter 4, it says in verse 6:

For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.

Okay, so the interpretation of Jesus going preaching victory to the wicked angels is hard to reconcile with this verse, because here the preaching of the Good News is said to be to the dead. And that's not usually a way you would refer to the wicked angels. You would talk about dead human beings, but you wouldn't speak about the angels (even if they were punished) as having been put to death because they're pure spirits. They don't have bodies that can die in the way that human beings do.

Another weakness of this interpretation that Jesus goes and preaches to the wicked angels in the prison of Hell is that it doesn't have any support — at least as far as I know. I haven't found any support among the Church Fathers. So it's a rather novel modern scholarly hypothesis. That doesn't make it wrong, but it does weaken it. That's the second option.

And then the third option is the one you're probably most familiar with, which is that 1 Peter 3:18-22 is speaking about the descent of Christ's soul into Hell or Hades (into the realm of the dead) after His Crucifixion on Good Friday and before His Resurrection on Easter Sunday. So this would link this verse, these verses, with the classic doctrine of Jesus' descent into Hell or descent to the realm of the dead.

In this view, you would interpret the verses as follows. When 1 Peter 3 says that Christ was:

...put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit...

The expression "made alive in the spirit" does not refer to His bodily Resurrection but rather the descent of His soul into the realm of the dead, so that He could then preach the Gospel to the dead. So that verse from 1 Peter 4, verse 6:

For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead...

...is correlated with chapter 3 here. Again, that verse isn't in the reading for today, but this interpretation links the two together. So when Jesus was made alive in the

spirit and went and preached to the spirits in prison, it's talking about Jesus going into the prison of souls — the realm of Hades, the realm of the dead (*sheol* in Hebrew) — in order to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of their redemption, to all of the souls of the old covenant who were waiting in this prison of the underworld of the realm of Hades (of the realm of the dead) for deliverance. He goes to preach the Gospel as victor on the cross...but before His Resurrection and His Ascension into Heaven.

Okay, the weakness of this view is that “made alive in the spirit” sounds more like resurrection than it does His soul descending. So it'd be a strange way to refer to His soul. It'd be an unusual way to refer to His soul descending into Hell. However, the strength of it is that — as I mentioned — it makes sense of that 1 Peter 4, verse 6. Otherwise, what does it mean to say:

...the gospel was preached even to the dead...

The final strength of it too — and this is important — is that it is the most ancient interpretation of 1 Peter chapter 3. So if you look at Clement of Alexandria, his commentary on John, and you look at other Church Fathers from that period, this interpretation of 1 Peter 3 is very, very ancient.

And it also has with it one last point of support, which is that it appears to be, of the three interpretations, it's the one that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* favors. So if you look at the section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the descent of Jesus into Hell, paragraph 632 says this, and I'll close with this from the living tradition:

The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was “raised from the dead” presuppose that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection. This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he

descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there.²

And that's *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 632, actually citing 1 Peter 3:18-19 in the footnote. So you can see there the *Catechism*...again, this isn't like an infallible definition from an ecumenical council or something like that. But this is the ordinary teaching of the Church...is proposing to us that the language of Christ going in the spirit to the spirits in prison is referring to Him going in His soul — which is a word used for the soul in the writings even of St. Paul, for example — to preach the Good News to the other souls who await the coming of the Savior in the realm of the dead.

For me, this is the interpretation that makes the best sense of the whole text, especially in the light of 1 Peter 3 *and* 1 Peter chapter 4. And it also is powerful because it lays a scriptural foundation for that article of faith (which is an article of faith) that Jesus descended into Hell...but also I think helps us to see something we often miss. Namely, that as we're preparing to celebrate the mystery of Christ's Passion and Death, we shouldn't forget that the mystery of Holy Saturday — of His descent into Hell — is also Gospel. It is also a message of Good News.

Jesus doesn't just conquer sin on Good Friday and conquer death on Easter Sunday. He also liberates the souls of the dead from the realm of the dead when He goes to proclaim the Good News of their redemption on Holy Saturday. And that's the great mystery of Holy Saturday that we call to mind every year during the sacred Triduum.

So this beautiful passage, 1 Peter 3, I think, prepares us in a powerful way and reminds us of the fact that Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection — in that event, He not only shared the experience of suffering and death with us, He even participated in and shared the experience of the sojourning of the human soul to this mysterious realm of the dead after death...so that when we prepare for our own death, we can recognize that we're not going to experience that alone. We don't

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 632

have to face it alone. Christ has already gone before us to the realm of the dead — not as one conquered, though — not as one imprisoned but as victor.