

Sermon ✝ February 21, 2021
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It is Lent, the traditional period of spiritual introspection and abstinence observed by Christians in remembrance of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Beginning on Ash Wednesday, it includes the forty days preceding Easter and is symbolic of the forty days Christ fasted in the wilderness. It should be noted that the Sundays during Lent are not really part of Lent . . . consequently, we have come to the First Sunday *in* Lent and not the First Sunday *of* Lent.

Lent, the word, is not a Biblical word. It is a derivation of the Saxon name for the month of March, *Lencten-Monath*, indicating that at this time of year daylight begins to exceed darkness.

We are reminded now that the cardinal word for this season is not *lent* but *penance*. The emphasis of this season is heard in the soul-groanings of biblical generations who have prostrated themselves before almighty God, praying "*Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.*"

When have we last prayed the sinner's prayer? Was it in the privacy of some quiet moment that, overtaken by some remorseful urge, we whispered the inaudible plea for mercy? Was it in the course of doing business with a conscience which, like the tide, just comes and comes, thrashing repeatedly upon our thinking? Was it today? Was it yesterday? When have we last prayed the sinner's prayer?

The prayer itself is not a confessional which immediately cancels our sin, but rather an overture, a "sign". It is our admission that we plan on doing something about our wrongdoings.

The sinner's prayer (*Lord be merciful to me a sinner*) is a sincere sign of repentance. There are many signs in the Bible. Signs play an important part in religious faith.

This morning's lesson from Genesis tells of one the most important of all signs: And God said to Noah, "*This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth . . .*"

The rainbow is a sign of God's covenant. A rainbow in the sky is a sign from God that we are loved. But . . . we say that we are enlightened people. We are possessors of scientific knowledge enabling us to explain rationally natural phenomena. We know that rainbows are actually created by refracted sunlight reflecting upon rain drops . . . and so they are.

So . . . we are driven to the matter of the perspective by which a thing is viewed. Noah was a very old man, he'd obviously seen rainbows before. It had rained before. But never before had a voice accompanied a rainbow saying, "*This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.*"

A natural phenomenon had now acquired *theological significance* because God transformed it into

the personal experience of an individual whose perspective enabled him to gather it in. The rainbow became more than just something natural which happens all the time . . . it was now a “sure sign” from a loving God.

Every rainbow is a universal covenant made with Noah, his three sons, and every living creature. The bow in the clouds is the sign that the covenant is sealed, that God is dependable, and God’s word is true.

Centuries later, a new covenant was struck and a new sign given. The bow itself is still in the clouds, but a greater sign has appeared to remind us that we are not only delivered from the threat of global destruction but also from spiritual self-destruction.

The sign in the Cross, and the covenant is: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* The message for this and every Lent is that the bow is still in the clouds, and the Cross yet hangs above the altar.

God is still active and involved in our world. God still cares, but somehow that is not enough . . . we need to care, too. We need to consider the signs and then consider the way we live our lives. The signs remain as a reminder but we need to do the work of changing.
When was the last time you prayed the sinner's prayer?

It is told that two brothers were once convicted of stealing sheep. This was before the days when criminals were allowed the luxury of being liberated on the grounds of some minute legal technicality. Justice came swiftly and the consequences were clearly defined.

According to custom, both brothers were brutally branded on the forehead with the letters “ST”. The marking would be recognized by all as the usual designation for a “sheep thief”.

One of the brothers, too embarrassed to remain in the community, wandered from one village to another attempting to disguise his reputation. However, true to the old adage, “a bird never flies so far that it escapes its tail,” he encountered hostility wherever he went. Embittered, he was to die and be buried in a forgotten grave.

The other brother, however, repented of his crime, remained in the community, and was determined to win back his respect. In his old age, he had gained the reputation of being a God-fearing man of integrity.

One day a stranger in the community could not help but take notice of the letters “ST” on the old man's forehead and felt led to inquire as to their meaning.

“I’m not sure”, replied one of the residents, “it all happened so long ago, but, knowing him as I do, I think it is the abbreviation of saint.”

People do change. People do endorse the covenant with the signature of penance.

When was the last time you prayed the sinner's prayer?

The bow is still in the clouds. The Cross still hangs above the altar.

The covenant is still binding, and the signature is still penance.

Amen.

