

## “An Ecological Lent”

- First Sunday of Lent
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- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Like you I struggle at the start of Lent each year with how to enter into it and make it real and how to make it new. Ingrained in me from youth—and perhaps in you too—is the compulsion to make Lenten resolutions, especially about what to give up. Inevitably I have come every year for sixty years six weeks from now to Good Friday and feel like a failure, guilty and ashamed that I have not lived out my resolutions of what I was determined back on this Sunday that Lent would be this year. Does this sound familiar to you; is it your experience also?

The Church has tried valiantly for fifty years now to change the conversation and the concentration of Lent from one of giving up and getting sad to one of reawakening to our own baptism, opening our eyes to how we are saved by the death of Christ and raised up by his resurrecting to a newness of life. In essence, the Church has tried to change Lent from 40 days about our will, to 40 days about God’s will in Christ for our life.

This year I am wondering if there is a new help, a new frame, a new way of living Lent which is indicated to by our readings today and might help us live Lent as the people we are today. My suggestion is that there may be a great help for us if we enter into 40 days of what I would like to call an “Ecological Lent”.

The scriptures today present Noah, and his family, and all the animals and living things saved from the waters of the flood by the Ark as a metaphor for baptism, being saved through water and the spirit by the wood of the cross. What’s remarkable is that God makes a covenant to Noah of a very special kind. Let’s hear it:

“I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and... all bodily creatures... the covenant between me and the earth... between me and you and all living beings.”

Note how this metaphor of the covenant of our baptism is so ecological: the earth, all bodily creatures, all living beings. Might this help us get out of our narrow individual-will Lent into a Lent much bigger than our resolutions, a Lent for all persons, all bodily creatures, a Lent which is a covenant with the earth? Scripture tells us that we were created to be God’s agents of his stewardship of the earth and all of his creation... not to save ourselves out of the earth but to be saved with the earth and with all living beings.

I believe that in our day we need to adopt this wider vision of God’s covenant, of God’s will. The Pope is writing an ecological encyclical due out in a few months. It must be important to him. What if we write our own ecological encyclical through how we live this Lent? We are helped by letting the season itself carry us as it turns from winter to spring, from darkness to light, from barrenness to growth. The turning of the season, of God’s creation, can carry us like an ark, can be the call to go to and get within the holy place of our own turning, our own prayer.

Perhaps rather than forgetting we are in Lent—as some years we do—we can let the day, the light, the growth, remind us what we are about and we can pray with it, part of the whole reality with which God has made a covenant and of which he makes us agents of this covenant of his will. This would be what I'm calling an "Ecological Lent".

The renewal of our baptism this season, as part of God's covenant with the earth, an "Ecological Lent", might help to wrest us from this false idea that the kingdom of God, the end point where all time is heading, is God saving us from this earth and taking us to heaven. Rather all of scripture shows, and the Church teaches, that the end point of time, where God is leading, the kingdom of God, is a renewal, a re-creation, of us and of the earth itself in the risen Christ before the face of God. God has a will for our earth. It is not that it be destroyed, but that it be re-created and lived in by us risen bodily from death with Christ in God. God is the first ecologist; Christ proclaims his will; and we are his agents.

Can this vision help us live this Lent this year in a new way? Ecological justice and sustainability is the great felt cause of our students. No other cause compares to it for them. Might an "Ecological Lent" help develop and support their faith and open them to Christ and to God who calls us to be agents of his stewardship of the earth and active participants in the kingdom of the re-created earth he is bringing about with our help? (By the way, Pope Francis did not say there would be dogs in heaven; rather that there would be dogs in "paradise", that is, in the re-created earth we call the kingdom.)

In regard to an "Ecological Lent", we are having a hard time finding out how we as a university in our investments could possibly—at the demand of some of our students—divest from fossil fuels, because they are co-mingled with all our investments and cannot be extracted without doing damage to the whole. So too in an "Ecological Lent" our personal challenge is to divest from the selfish ways we take care of ourselves but do not act as agents on behalf of the earth. It is hard to divest from these selfish ways because they too are co-mingled with our whole way of living and cannot be easily extracted. In an "Ecological Lent" we are not asked to give up candy or a glass of wine, but to give up in some small, meaningful way, whatever in our lifestyle hurts God's covenant with the earth, with us, and with all living beings. What would it be for you... and would it be a new, more real way of living Lent this year?

God gave to Noah a sign in the sky of his covenant with the earth, a beautiful sign, the rainbow. The sign of our covenant—celebrated and lived and deepened in this Lent in the renewal of our baptism, our ark of salvation—is even more beautiful, for it is the risen, bodily Christ, the promise and assurance of our own bodily re-creation and of the earth. That's the sign over this Lent, which I am suggesting might be made new for us as an "Ecological Lent".