



THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

March 9, 2003

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

These are our desert days. The winds of war hot and angry swirl and gust about us, tearing at our hearts and minds. We hear daily of the handiwork of tyrants in Korea and Iraq. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Palestinians and Israelis ride a vicious and unending see-saw of attack and reprisal, attack and reprisal, making the Holy Land anything but. And in our land, the daily newspapers and weekly newsmagazines regale us each day and week with stories of the brazen corruption and arrogant fraud that infect the upper echelons of business and industry. News of the newly unemployed is an every-other-day occurrence, at best. And many wait, wondering when they will be the next to face a jobless future. Meanwhile our retirement and pension funds look more and more pathetic each quarter, and the prospects of a comfortable retirement look less and less likely by the day. And even though spring is just around the corner, prolonged drought and empty reservoirs foretell of yet one more season of dried landscapes and wild mountain fires. Where then shall we find flowers to adorn the flag-draped coffins of our dead coming home from war? But, then again, already in the sands of Iraq the flowers are too few and the innocent dead far too many.

These are our desert days and we wander about, tried at every turn by one evil after another. The ravaging and roaring beasts surround us, our hearts are melted within us, our strength is dried up like a potsherd.

But when was it ever not thus? Perhaps our folly was in believing it would be otherwise. When have not people in every age been sorely tried by evils of one sort or another? Consider the early church. Even then the Holy Land was the scene of a most unholy turmoil. Only forty years after Christ, Jerusalem lay in smoldering ruins, not to rise again from the rubble until the 20th century, and its inhabitants dispersed among the nations even until today. The early followers of the Christian way, those whom the Gospels first addressed, lived with the daily and real prospect of arrest, torture, and execution. Those early Christians and the Christians of many times and many places assembled furtively and departed somberly, never knowing who would be the next to face the death squads. When our spiritual ancestors prayed the words that would be better translated into English, "Save us in the time of trial," they prayed them with pounding hearts and shortened breath; the time of trial was more daily than bread.

For the early Christians, baptism into Christ's death was not a theological abstraction, rather it was immanent fleshy, bloody reality. We hear in today's second reading, "For Christ *also* suffered and was put to death in the flesh." For them, baptism was the pledge that their trials and those of Christ were made one. And so too for us. We walk through this, our time of trial with Christ – or better put, Christ walks with us through this time of trial – Christ carries us with himself through these dreaded and dreadful desert days. We have this promise that when we are paralyzed with anxiety and fear and can scarce put one foot in front of the other, we are not left to ourselves. The one who joined himself to us in baptism breathes in us, with us, for us, sustaining us in the time of trial with the promise that we, in him and with him, will be delivered, have already been delivered, from every evil.

In today's Gospel we hear that the angels waited on Jesus when he was in the desert. So too do angels, messengers from God, wait upon us in our desert days. Two of these messengers appeared here last Sunday.

Close to 11.00 last Sunday, little Christopher (his name means *Christ bearer*) came trooping into church with little Briana in tow, his little hand, grubby from some Sunday School project, gripping tightly to her little hand. Together they stopped at the font. Christopher stood on his tippy-toes and dunked his free hand into the water and then with great delight and solemn purpose he made the sign of the cross on himself. And wetting his hand again he reached to Briana and made the sign of the cross upon her body. "Trust like these little ones," said Jesus. "That's how you will know the realm of God." These angels carry well the promise proclaimed by our second reading: Baptism now saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

So turn and hear again in these desert days the promise of God to you: In Holy Baptism you have been joined to Christ. And in this time of trial, you will be sustained by the Christ whose resurrection is already yours, and no authorities or powers can or will have the last word over you. You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ – forever – and against that sign, *not even the very powers of hell shall ever prevail*.

And as you leave here this day, consider stopping at the font and marking yourself with that promise. Who knows, you may very well bump into another angel or two back there – or maybe you'll be one yourself.