

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Edwin Smith for Lent 1, year B
March 1, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha

The days of Lent have begun. If last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, was the day of our humility, today, is a day of our hope.

Today we hear of God's covenant with Noah and through him with all human beings--and we are given hope. The story of Noah and the flood has probably spawned more jokes than any other story in scripture. Certainly, it has been fertile ground thru the years for cartoonists. As necessary and important as humor is for us, what is essential in the story of Noah is that God offers--promises--salvation, and we are given hope.

In the Epistle, we are reminded that Christ died for our sins, "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." we are reminded, too, that the water of Noah's day brought destruction, but that the water of baptism in our day brings hope. We are told Jesus is at the right hand of God, and We are given hope.

In the Gospel lesson, we are witness to the Baptism of our Lord -- a baptism in which we share. Biblical scholars and theologians have argued for centuries the reasons for Jesus submitting to the water baptism of John. Here was that lunatic from the desert, dressed in animal skins and probably not smelling all that good, either. Here was John preaching repentance and offering baptism. We know our Lord was sinless. He certainly did not need John's baptism. In other accounts of Jesus baptism, even John recognizes how ludicrous it is for Jesus to be baptized by him. But, Jesus submits to it, anyway. And we are given hope.

Then, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. He is tempted by the devil, but he resists, and responds by quoting scripture. And he is ministered to by angels, and we are given hope.

Years ago, I had the privilege of attending a banquet at the end of a week-long workshop. The featured speaker that night was a Lutheran pastor by the name of Walt Wangerin. Some of you may have read one of his several books. He is one of the finest story tellers I've ever read or heard. I'm no match for him, but he did tell a story that night I'd like to share with you this morning. It's a story about his son, Matthew.

When Matthew was in the second grade, about seven years old, Walt said the winds became the direction in which Matthew moved. When he decided to do something, he'd just do it. He wouldn't stop and think about it.

Walt went into Matthew's bedroom one day. He discovered his son seated on the bed surrounded by comic books. He said to Matthew, "Where did you get the comic books?" Matthew said, "I took them out of the library." "Uou took them out of the library?" "Yes." "You mean you took them from the library?"

"Yes." "You mean you stole them from the library?" "Yes."

Walt called the librarian and told her what Matthew had done and said, "I'm going to bring Matthew and the comic books to the library. He will return them to you." Matthew did return the books, and he received a stern lecture about stealing from what Walgerin said was an equally stern librarian.

The following summer, they vacationed in a remote community where they occasionally went to the drug store for an ice cream cone. When they returned home at the end of the summer, Walt opened Matthew's bureau drawer and found another Stack of comic books. Matthew said, "I stole them from the store this summer." Walt took the comic books, went into the living room, started a fire in the fireplace, and one-by-one he threw the comic books into the flames. With each one, he told Matthew how wrong it was to steal, reminding him of the eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not steal."

A year later, Matthew once again stole comic books. This time, Walt told Matthew, he would have to spank him. He sent him to his bedroom. Walt joined him a few moments later. He put Matthew over his knee, and spanked him five times with his bare hand. Walt said it was five times because first of all he wanted to feel what Matthew was feeling. Second, he determined that if he spanked him just five times, he wouldn't cut his spankings short out of pity, but also out of anger he would not go beyond that. When he finished, he put Matthew next to him on the bed.

Matthew just sat there. He did not shed a single tear.

Not wanting to see him cry, Walt said, "Matthew, I'm going to leave you alone for a few minutes," and he left the room. After he stepped out in the hall, Walt began to cry, himself. He cried hard. Then he washed his face, and went back into the room to speak with Matthew.

Years later, according to Walt, Matthew and his mother were driving home from a shopping trip. They were talking about childhood memories and the subject of comic books came up.

Matthew recalled that comic book episode. He told his mother, "After that incident, I never stole again. I never stole anything."

His mother said, "I suppose the reason why is your Father spanked you." Matthew turned to his mother; "Oh, no," he said. "It was because when he stepped out of the room I could hear him crying."

During Lent, we are invited to a journey with our Lord Jesus--a journey that will take him, and us, to the cross, the grave, and ultimately, to victory over death. It is a journey we cannot undertake, let alone complete, without humility and hope.

In the bidding prayer we heard on Ash Wednesday, we were invited to the "observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer and fasting, and self-denial; and by the reading and meditating on God's holy word."

If we accept that invitation offered us, we will be reminded more than we would like of the

Hopelessness of our human condition--of our sins and our sinful nature. And, that is as it should be. But, to do all this, and to do it without the hope we have been given in baptism would be an even greater sin than any other we have committed. It would be a greater sin, because we, too, have a Father who cries for us--and we are given hope.