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First Sunday of Lent

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Genesis 9:8-15

Psalms 25

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:12-15

When we were teenagers, my brother and I spent a lot of time playing the guitar and singing the folk songs of the day. Our parents loved our singing, but Mom couldn't bear to hear us sing songs about war, especially the laments over the dead or the soldiers who came home maimed. We weren't allowed to sing them in her presence. When Mom heard of someone who had died in Vietnam, she would visibly choke up for a moment and then quietly say something like "God be with his poor wife and children."

Mom was a young wife with an infant boy on the day she saw her husband go off to World War II. Every day from the time Dad left until the moment she saw him get off the train in Denver in 1945, she prayed, worried and lived with a hole in her heart. Anytime she heard of others living through the same thing, she got tears in her eyes. She really did share their pain. That is what compassion means.

In today's psalm, we pray to learn God's ways. We sing of God's compassion and mercy, of God's love and goodness. Then, we blithely ask to share those. As Jesus warned James and John, we may not know what we are asking.

When we ask God, "Teach me your paths," we are opening ourselves to existential knowledge of divine compassion. That is a highfalutin way of saying we want to understand God's ways in our flesh — in our heart and guts as well as in our minds. We want to be moved by the same loving identification with others that moves God's saving love for us.

We are offering ourselves to cry God's tears, which, like everything else divine, are without measure. Of course, the other side of it is that we are also asking to rejoice with God's own joy.

Today's Gospel gives us two segments in one Gospel reading, both of them short. First, we hear that the Spirit compelled Jesus to go to the desert, where he struggled with everything that it means to be human. How was Jesus tested? Mark only tells us that he found himself between the Spirit and Satan, between the wild beasts and the angels.

C.S. Lewis may have been thinking of Jesus' test when he wrote in *The Screwtape Letters* that human beings are "amphibians — half spirit and half animal." Lewis said that we belong to both time and eternity, and that finding our balance in those two dimensions, learning how to be embodied spirits, or divinely inspirited persons of flesh and blood, is the goal of human life.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis portrays a tutor devil, Screwtape, instructing his neophyte nephew demon about how to waylay human beings from their core vocation as images of God. He told his nephew that the task is to get them to fixate on just one or the other of the dimensions of their nature, the spirit or the flesh. According to Screwtape, body-denying attempts at holiness are as much a betrayal of the human vocation as is licentiousness with no regard for the human spirit. Both deny true humanity and bring misery in their wake.

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Jesus' desert test seems to have entailed precisely that core human struggle. Jesus was grappling with how to be a true Son of God, a person of flesh and blood, consciously and willingly inhabited by God.

In the second, but intimately connected, Gospel that we hear today, Jesus emerged from the desert with his own answer to the human dilemma. He called it the Gospel, or the good news of God. That Gospel was Jesus' awareness that the reign of God was at hand precisely because God was at hand.

Jesus took what Israel had ever dreamed of, God's dwelling among humankind, and proclaimed that it was a reality that everyone could experience if only they were open to it. The reign of God that Jesus proclaimed is a spiritual reality that exists in time and space. It is the truly human way of living, being willingly loved and loving inspirited creatures.



(Mark Bartholomew)

The offer Jesus made to people was really very simple — and life changing: "Repent and believe." What that really meant was "Take on a new perspective! Believe what I am saying about God and about humanity!"

Jesus, the Son of God, understood God's love for humanity and all of what human beings were capable. He saw that his mission was to make God's love present and to share his status as God's Son with all of humanity. He knew it was possible, and he also knew that it would come at the cost of true compassion. Those who accept Jesus' offer will cry with God's own tears of sorrow and of joy.

[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is writing the history of the St. Joseph sisters in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication *Celebration*, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org. Sign up to receive [email newsletters](#) every time

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