

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a lighted candle or votive, a small bowl of water, and a small piece of evergreen at the center of your group.

LEADER: Earth's springtime stirs the roots of our spirits.

ALL: Tree buds swell and crocuses push through snow.

LEADER: Rivers run high.

ALL: Water puddles beneath our steps.

LEADER: The sun warms our faces.

ALL: We breathe deeper of air and Holy Spirit.

LEADER: Each Lent we remember the power of love Jesus reveals in his death and resurrection.

ALL: Let us revive our lost hopes and awaken to new life.

LEADER: Jesus exhorts us to reform our lives and believe in his good news.

ALL: We resolve to live in hope.

Hand the bowl of water around your group. Bless and sprinkle one another with the water.

EACH: Baptism calls us to be people of hope and new life.

What if it is our affections that pull us more strongly to accomplish our dreams than the ascetic disciplines we often put our trust in.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

What if our senses are not the problem, leading us into temptation at every side, but are the catalysts for meeting the people in our lives?

The senses are doorways to community. They stir our memories of connections with others and open our hearts to those we see, hear, and touch each day.

I remember seeing Van Gogh's irises at the Chicago Art Institute. The painting stopped people in their tracks. They gazed and then touched or leaned into the person they were with. The beauty had to be shared. The painting seemed to make conscious a communion with beauty the seers already shared in one another.

What if we need to fall in love again with those closest to us, giving them time and ear to reengage? What if we make a point this Lent to do with family and friends what unfailingly brings us joy and recharges our batteries?

What if we need to fall in love again with Earth, its beauty, diversity, and unfailing

burst each spring into new life? I always take heart from the flowers. One single snowdrop blooms first in our garden. Tulip spikes push up through snow on their mission to bring color back to the bleak winter landscape. Yellow forsythia bushes beat them to it.



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Bluebells bloom on our prairie boulevard before the crocuses and prairie smoke, a member of the rose family. Dutchman's breeches and trout lilies appear in the garden.

Tulips and daffodils soon bloom in every color, wilt, and make room for the irises and lilies. The fruit trees froth into blossom in yards front and back. Our city blooms and hints the new life of Easter.

● With whom or what might you fall in love again this Lent?

GOSPEL

The Spirit drives Jesus into the desert.



NARRATOR 1: Immediately after his baptism the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert.

NARRATOR 2: There for 40 days Satan tested him. He was with wild beasts, and angels ministered to him.

NARRATOR 1: After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

JESUS: The time is fulfilled. God's reign has come near. Repent and believe in the good news.

Mark 1.12-15

itinerant. He carries on ministries of healing, teaching, preaching, associating with outcasts, standing in opposition to unjust structures, forming a community of equals, celebrating meals with friends, and praying alone and with others.

The whole of Mark's gospel unfolds what awakens in Jesus after living in harmony with God and all creation in the desert. "God's reign has come near," Jesus announces. God is near, within, and around us—the reality in which Jesus lived in the desert.

● What do you think happened to Jesus in the desert?

● What is your experience of desert time?

● What is the good news you believe in?

Jesus' relationship with God mirrors the relationship to which he calls us. We are God's beloved. The Spirit drives us, too. Really knowing this in our bones empowers our deepest, best selves to reach out in warmth, hospitality, healing, hope, and deep care for those around us.

Like Jesus, our lives in the embrace of God lead us to bring God near to others.

Lent is a beginning and renewal for many. Lent is when catechumens intensify their preparation to enter the waters of baptism. Lent is when the whole Christian community makes a concerted effort to renew our baptismal vows and celebrate resurrection as something that happens not only to Jesus but to the whole community.

Earth awakens into spring despite the burdens we humans put upon its

The Spirit impels Jesus into ministry.

Sunday's gospel about Jesus' temptation and first preaching immediately follows Jesus' baptism, an event that inaugurates his public ministry. As Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens split open, and the Spirit descends upon him. A voice affirms that Jesus is "my beloved Son." These images—the open heavens, the descending dove, the affirming voice—create a theological picture of Jesus in relationship with God, Father and Spirit.

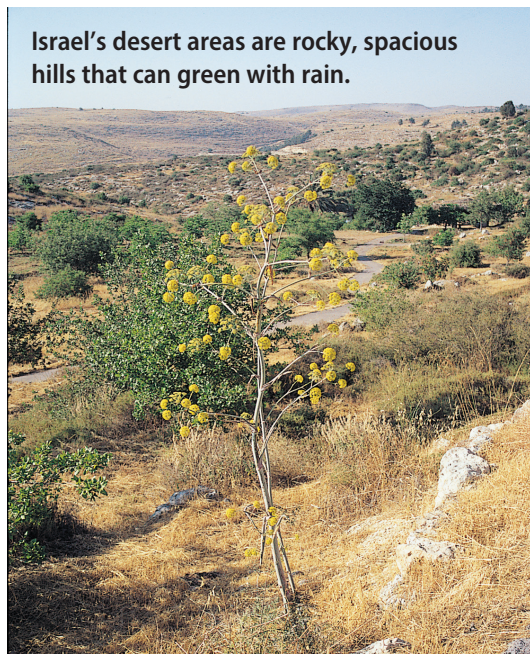
Mark wastes few words describing Jesus' sojourn in the desert. In two verses Mark tells us that Jesus went into the desert and stayed for 40 days with wild beasts and angels (an interesting combination of companions). The two verbs in the account stand out—*drives* and *tests*. After 40 days Jesus begins preaching in Galilee, announcing the good news of God.

All three synoptic gospels place this desert time of testing or temptation at the beginning of Jesus' public life. Something happens to Jesus in this time.

We can project that in his humanity Jesus is coming to a fuller sense of self-identity and a deeper sense of his own mission. Jesus' baptism and desert experience connect him with God, with Holy Mystery. His solitude leads to his preaching and prophetic actions. The interplay of the mystical and the prophetic begins to spin itself out in Jesus' life.

After his desert time Jesus lives the rest of his life as an

Israel's desert areas are rocky, spacious hills that can green with rain.



capacity to sustain life. Lent moves purposefully and relentlessly toward Easter, even in the midst of sorrow, suffering, and global peril. Lent says, “We are choosing hope, and we are choosing new life.”

The practices we choose for Lent symbolize our hopes. We say in effect that we believe new life can come. We believe that we have the power of the Spirit within us to initiate transformation in the world.

In Sunday’s gospel Jesus says, “Reform your lives and believe in the good news.” The good news is that everything is possible—not easy, but possible.

In the midst of wars and rumors of wars, acts of violence, poverty, inattention to climate change, and too sparing educational opportunities for millions of people, we still choose hope. We choose resurrection. We choose to act for change.

● **When have you had a sense that you are God’s beloved?**

● **What is one way you act in hope of change?**

In the language of spirituality today, we might call Jesus’ desert solitude a time of discernment. To discern means opening one’s heart to the Spirit moving where it will—possibly beyond where one anticipates. To discern involves seeking



On the 1st Sunday of Lent, a catechumen signs the Book of Life and begins final preparation for baptism at Easter.

self-knowledge and listening to others’ views and feelings. To discern involves recognizing where one’s gifts and the unmet needs of people around us intersect.

St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, teaches a daily practice of prayer and discernment. First, one looks back on a day, asking what or who energized me, gave me life, fueled my commitments, stirred my dreams, animated me? Pray in gratitude for these reflections. Second, we let surface the people or interactions that haunt or trouble us. What or who do I keep thinking about? What leaves me bored or marginalized? What saps my energies? Pray for God’s help with all you want to change.

● **What is testing your spirit this Lent?**

● **Practice using Ignatius’s daily discernment and prayer. To what might this practice call you?**



God will never again destroy the earth.

The first readings of the Lenten Sundays retell great moments in Israel’s history, beginning this year with God’s covenant with Noah. Most peoples of the ancient Middle East tell flood stories.

Ancient people imagined their world completely surrounded on all sides—up, down, and around—by water. They imagined their world as flat with waters below, the source of springs. A dome topped their world, holding back the waters above. This is the firmament God creates on the second day (Genesis 1.6).

When the flood begins, waters both bubble up through springs from below and pour through the dome of the heavens from above. “The fountains of the deep burst forth; the floodgates of the sky opened” (Genesis 7.11). In our fears of nuclear winter or global warming, the same ancient fears of extinction well up.

In the Genesis flood story, God decides to wipe out

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DO SOMETHING

● **Identify activities you might do with a group during Lent. Discern what needs doing in your parish or neighborhood. Gather a group, or make a decision together in your group the next time you meet.**

all humankind because of people's wickedness—everyone, that is, except Noah (6.5-7). God commands Noah to make an ark. It has one window, which Noah seals when the rain begins.

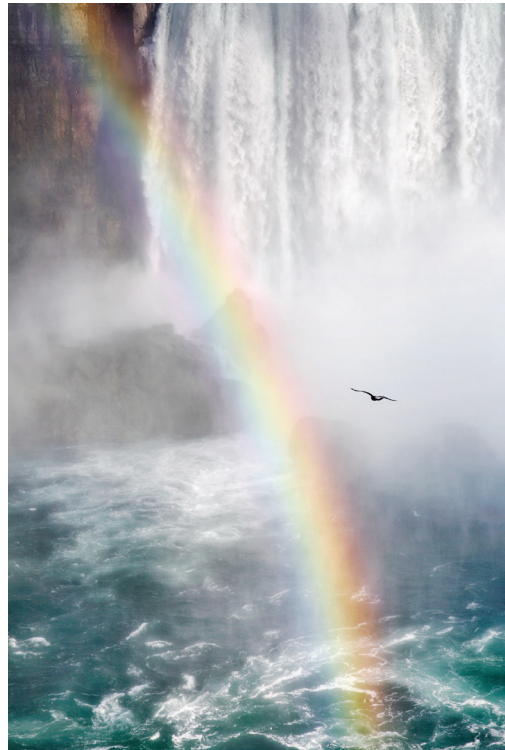
For 40 days of darkness, Noah, his wife, his children, and the pairs of living creatures live inside the ark, not knowing if they will survive. Day after day rain pounds the wooden ark. Waters rise above the mountains. The ark floats closer and closer to the dome of the sky, where it can rise no farther.

Finally the rain stops. Noah opens the window. For weeks the waters recede, and then the dry land reappears, a repeat of the third day of creation.

Noah's name means *Settler*. He is the believer in God who survives the flood and resettles the earth. After Noah makes a thanksgiving offering, God promises never again to destroy the earth. The rainbow becomes a sign of God's covenant with the earth.

In recent years we have seen the terrible power of water in hurricanes, floods, and violent storms. We also experience the power of water to nourish, heal, and cleanse. We know the awesome beauty of water in our lakes, rivers, and oceans. We watch Earth thaw and water trickle and tease the soil to life.

Noah's story begins with a destructive flood but ends in God's promise of an everlasting covenant. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River signifies a new time in his life. Water is the sign



of new life in baptism. Daily water reminds us we live in the presence of life-giving mystery and hope for new life.

God's rainbow sign

God said to Noah and his children with him: "See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you: all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals that were with you and came out of the ark. I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth."

God added: "This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign

of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings."

Genesis 9.8-15

● What threatens Earth and its creatures today? What fears do you have for our planet and people?

● What does the flood story have to teach those preparing for Baptism?

PRAY

LEADER: Let us take a couple minutes of silence to let surface our personal resolves and commitments to fall in love.

LEADER: Brother Jesus, you revive our faith in the power of love.

ALL: We believe in your good news.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

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