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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
First Sunday in Lent  
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Lectionary Year A: Romans 5:12-19

One might hope that the season of Lent still has enough cultural significance around the world that one can still assume that most people know what it entails. We maybe don't want to thank all those revelers down in New Orleans for Mardi Gras, but, thanks to them, we know when Ash Wednesday falls because they're tearing things up in The Big Easy on Fat Tuesday. And then, after Fat Tuesday, everything is supposed to quiet down for the season of self-denial and fasting known as Lent.

For some reason, though, I just can't imagine things quieting down too much in New Orleans...even during Lent!

Certainly, Lent is no recent innovation. It has its roots in the Early Church, well before Christianity dominated much of the Western world. The word itself comes from an Old English word for springtime, and, indeed, Lent is a springtime of sorts for us spiritually. We "cultivate ourselves" and dig deep into our "soil" to make way for the new life to come at Easter. But what was it intended for when the Church began observing it? Let's take a moment to answer that question...

Remember that this was the Early Church, and so there were still a lot of people in the "known" world back then who didn't have any knowledge of Christianity. The people who were being received into the faith were, for the most part, adults, and not babies, as is mostly the case for us now. So the Church needed a time for instruction prior to baptizing people into the Christian faith.

This is what the season of Lent was in its earliest form...a six-week period prior to Easter set aside for preparing those who were new to the faith for Baptism. The teaching component was called catechesis, and those being taught were called catechumens. We are familiar with the term catechism, which refers to a teaching document, and thus, we can conclude that the teaching of catechumens used a catechism of sorts. Catechism here would be much like we know it -- an instruction in the basics of the faith.

After the catechumens had been suitably instructed, they were baptized at the Vigil of Easter, which would, of course, include a celebration of the Lord's resurrection, but the Baptisms themselves would take place much earlier during the Vigil, before the daybreak of Easter dawn. The Baptism of the catechumens would bring them into full membership in the Church, meaning that they were now welcome to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, among other things. And, of course, the Vigil of Easter included Holy Communion in celebration of the Lord's resurrection. If everything was timed just right the Vigil would conclude as the sun was rising. Needless to say, it was a very lengthy service!

Easter Vigils are still held today in many Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran churches; I'm happy to announce that, here at St. Anne's, the Vigil will make a return after an absence of several years. We, like many other faith communities, will bend the rules a little bit and begin on Saturday evening after sundown and conclude the service around ten or eleven o'clock. Regardless, the Vigil is not for those who want church to be over with in an hour!

Much has been written and said about restoring Lent to something a little more like what it was in the Early Church. Some of you may have encountered con-

gregations that hold classes for newcomers during Lent and have relatively long traditions of celebrating Easter Vigils, complete with Baptisms of adults as well as children. My personal observation is that this reflects a considerable change in our culture. We are, in many ways, finding ourselves in a situation similar to that of the Early Church. We can no longer assume that everyone -- adults especially -- is baptized, and we cannot presuppose even the most basic knowledge of the Christian faith among a random sampling of our countrymen and -women.

So one answer is bring back the catechumenate!

At St. Anne's, we will be having a Lenten educational opportunity on Wednesday evenings. It promises to be quite interesting, and fits very well with the original intention of the season.

But, whichever way you look at it, Lent stretches us a little bit, too. Think of how the pattern of dying and rising challenges us all here, right now on this First Sunday in Lent. By dying and rising, I mean the return to the place where we died in order to be born anew in Christ. That place, one would say, is the baptismal font. But in order for us to come anywhere close to comprehending the gift of Baptism, we need to go to the source. (Not entirely coincidentally, font and source are synonyms and come from the same Latin root!)

In Baptism, we recognize the necessity for sin to die and a new self to be born. And yet, sin is all around us and is something we can't rid ourselves completely of. So what do we do? We remember this great gift that we received by water and God's Word, knowing that God, through Baptism, opened up for us a new and better way -- one that frees us from the bondage to sin. And this promise is granted to us through Christ himself, to whom we are joined in Baptism and by

whom we receive the forgiveness of sin.

In this morning's Second Reading, the apostle Paul gives us an excellent summary of how Christ figures into this making of a new self. He writes: "For if the many died through the one man's (Adam's) trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many" (Romans 5:15b). What happens in Baptism is the trespass of the "one man" (read: Adam) is drowned, and you rise to receive the abundant, free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ! Paul is saying that many died through the sin of Adam, but many more still will have life because of Jesus Christ. And for us, that "life in Christ" is both rooted and sustained in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The old self drowns and the new self rises to new life, and thus, wherever we see a baptismal font -- or wherever we see water, for all that it matters -- we are reminded of what that gift means for us!

The old self has been drowned and the new self has risen!

Don't forget, too, about how this all changes the course of our eternal destiny. Paul makes this quite clear in our text. He writes: "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Romans 5:18). Adam's rebellion, as we learn in the book of Genesis, has a virtually endless string of consequences that leads all the way to you and me and puts us in need of forgiveness, and without that forgiveness, we are damned. So the "one man's act of righteousness" (read: Christ dying on the cross) opens for us the door to everlasting life in the Kingdom of God. And, by that one "act of righteousness," our sin is forgiven and we are saved.

And so we die and rise. We die to sin and Adam's condemnation and we rise to

the new life and forgiveness granted to us through the obedience of Jesus Christ. Paul couldn't have put it any better than he did in the closing verse of our text: "For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Baptism recognizes that disobedience and the sin that stemmed from it -- and drowns it! It takes that "old Adam" and puts him to death. "Who takes his place?", you ask. Jesus Christ. By his death and resurrection we die and rise -- in him, and with him. And we receive the life and the forgiveness and the justification and the righteousness that only he can give!

So stretch yourself a little bit during this season of Lent by thinking about what it means to die and rise -- and about what bountiful baptismal gifts lie therein. Stretch yourself a little bit more by taking these weeks of Lent to exercise the intellect that God gave you -- and study with us during this season set aside for instruction in the Christian faith. And, perhaps, through this season and through the calling you received long, long ago through the waters of Baptism, you might find yourself loving and serving your Lord with a courage and commitment you have never known before.

Start with one man's disobedience and one man's obedience. Think of where Adam has led you, and think of where Jesus can lead you. Somewhere in there, you will get pretty good at dying and rising.

Amen.