

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We're 3 to 4 days into Lent and some of you, like me, are still be thinking, how do I make this Lent more meaningful? Let's look at Noah and his voyage in the ark and see if he can help spark a new spiritual journey in us as we prepare for Christ's resurrection.

Growing up, I was is an avid swimmer and every year we started our season with "stroke practice." It was a tedious matter of making small changes to the mechanics of my stroke by swimming very slowly and concentrating on one or two improvements. "Point your elbows!" "Follow through!" My coach would yell as I inevitably lost my concentration and fell back into my old ways.

Muscle memory doesn't change overnight, so this tiresome practice went on for 5 or 6 weeks, or in Lenten terms, 40 days not counting Sundays. But in the end, stroke practice was the most beneficial thing I did. These small improvements accumulated year after year, like compound interest, and soon, I was winning races and breaking records. This made swimming fun!

Similarly, Lent is a time to improve the practice of our faith. It's less about giving up something and enduring the pain, and more about, removing the barriers between us and God.

Noah was "olympic quality" when it comes to loving God. He was holy, obedient and completely trusting of God. Genesis tells us, "Noah was a righteous man and he walked with God." He seemed to be spiritually centered and walked with God in his heart. You could say he was *filled* with God's Holy Spirit.

He also listened to God. God gave him specific instructions on how to build the ark, a vessel to hold numerous animals and people, withstand constant storms, and keep from leaking in dangerous waters. "Make yourself an ark of gopherwood" said the Lord, "The length of the ark will be three hundred cubits," or 440 ft, "and cover it inside and out with pitch" a resin made from tree sap. It's predicted the ark would have taken Noah 50 to 75 years to build. Each day he built onto what he had the day before, just like we are called to continuously work on our relationship with God.

All the while, his neighbors would have considered him ridiculous, building a huge boat on dry land with no ability to move it to the water to make it useful.

Likewise, there are people out there today who think our spiritual journey is ridiculous, yet, like Noah we persevere in our faith.

Noah trusted God with everything, even his life. He left his home behind, loaded the ark as God instructed, and sealed up the doors. The ark was a rudderless boat with God at the helm, and Noah was all in.

The journey lasted for over a year. *A year* isolated inside the ark with only his family, not knowing when they would walk on dry land again. It's starting to sound a little like Covid! But in the end, we have God and Noah to thank for the ark's safe arrival and a successful reboot of the human race.

Christ also surrendered to the Father's will to save the human race. The second reading says, "Christ suffered for sins once . . . that he might lead you to God." By dying for our sins, we are offered a new destination, heaven, for those who repent and believe. Jesus said, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." Jesus is the ticket that allows us to board his ark of forgiveness and journey to a place of joy with the Father. How do we get to the point, like Noah, of going "all in" with Jesus?

Lent is about finding a better path, a path that leads us to be more holy, obedient and trusting in God as Noah was. We strive to take on God's mission in a deeper way. Lent is about becoming a new vessel, according to God's design, leaving something from our old life behind, and going beyond our comfort zone to serve the Lord.

What was my best Lent ever? Meeting Joan Bear and reading the Liturgy of the Hours with other parishioners before daily mass, a habit that lasted for many years. Lent gives us that extra incentive to answer the question, "What are YOU doing for Lent?" Without Lent, I may not have said, "Yes" to Joan and may not have landed here at your deacon today...

As we decide how to improve our spiritual "stroke" this Lent, let's begin by praying daily for direction. Listen carefully, and like a coach, God will yell out (or whisper) His instructions. Let's pick one thing that needs attention in our spiritual lives and then partake in the tedious matter of making that change last for a lifetime. Finding the right Lent is a worthy cause and a gift not only to our savior and creator, but to everyone we meet as we bring a better version of ourselves to life.