Renewing Our Covenant with God This Lent

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My name is Father Chase Hilgenbrinck, and today's retreat reflection will be based upon the readings that church gives us for the first Sunday of Lent. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Heavenly Father, we give You thanks and praise for the gift of this time of purification and of preparation. We ask, Lord, that You would allow us to look at our lives with honesty and with courage, so that we may live more fully the resurrected life that Your son, Jesus Christ, came to bring us. So, we ask Your blessing upon us today, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

You know, if you're like me, these first couple days of Lent are the hardest days of the entire Lenten season. You know, we want to say that we're through that first week, but the reality is that we just started on Ash Wednesday. We're only a few days in, and sometimes that feels despairing, because they're the hardest days. But the reason for that is because we're just beginning our new habits, right. We've done a little bit of fasting, and we've abstained from meat, and we've stripped some things out of our lives that we wanted to take away to show God that we truly trust in Him, and we do not rely on these other things. In fact, by stripping those things away, we're preparing for maybe larger tests that are going to come in life, and we're going to remember in whom we really trust. And so, we're training ourselves.

During this time of Lent, I'm always reminded of the times that I spent in different preseasons with different teams throughout my life. And on these teams, the preseason was always the thing that we dreaded the most. And when you're in the midst of it, it's the worst. The first couple days of preseason you're being taxed physically, to say the least. It is draining, and you feel like you're going to die at times, you feel like you're never going to make it to the end. And you're also being drained mentally, at times emotionally. For me also, adding my spirituality to that, my prayer, I felt like I was being drained, but I was asking God to fill me with energy in all of those areas, so that I could be the best that I could be.

But why does a team go through a preseason? Why do we do that to ourselves? Why do we kill ourselves, right? Well, we do so in order to be at our best, right. We strip things away, we change our diet, we change our sleep habits during those times, we recognize all that we need to do physically to get ourselves ready for the test of the entire season. We recognize that we're not yet at our best, and we can be even better. And so, without that time, if we're being honest on any team., we

recognize that preseason is necessary not just for right now, not just to see what we're made of, but to be able to be prepared for the tests that are to come, to have perseverance and endurance, even at the end of the season, which our preseason sets us up for.

And so, during this time, we should reflect on that, and realize that our mindset should be not "I just can't wait for this thing to be over." But the reality is that we're growing. This is a time of growth, a growth and preparation, so that we can live a new life when this time of preparation is over. And, you know, I'm reminded of that as we read our readings throughout this weekend. The first reading is one that's very familiar to us. It's the story of Noah, one that we've probably known from our youth. The story of Noah is that famous story in which the purpose of it was we hear that God was upset with all the evil that He saw in the humanity that He created. The evil that men had in their hearts. Unable to reverse that strain, He realized that He needed to do something drastic. And therefore, we know that a flood came upon the earth, a flood, the floodwaters that were to come to wash away all evil.

But within that, we recognize this sign of hope. That God prepares a new creation. And that new creation is being prepared through a man named Noah, a man who we know was chosen, as it says in the scriptures, because of his righteousness. Notice that God is, whenever He chooses people throughout the scriptures, He's always looking for righteousness, a word that means those who trust in Him, those who obey God's words, those who truly love Him, and know that they've been created by God, and want to live in relationship with Him. At the foundation of that, we realize that He's always chosen men and women who are humble.

The Blessed Virgin Mary, who you see behind me at this very moment, was perhaps the most humble of all of God's creation. And she was like putty in His hands, she was like that clay that He was able to form and to shape and to bring a new creation into this world, right. To bring God Himself into this world, so that we could have a new creation, a new covenant in His love. And so, we see that in Noah's story, that Noah was being prepared for a new creation, for a new humanity, for a new covenant, as it were. And so, throughout all that time, we know the rest of the story. Noah gathered his family upon this ark, which he was to build, and which he built with great patience and obedience I imagine. And during that time, he gathered his family, he gathered a pair of animals of every kind of that were on the earth, he brought them into the ark.

And we can imagine during that time, that time of trepidation for Noah, I'm sure that there were times that he was very afraid for himself, for his family. I'm sure that he saw the earth being flooded, and at times maybe even despaired. Can you

imagine seeing the entire world, how scary that would be to see the earth around you flooded. No signs of life, no signs of land, no signs of where my livelihood is going to come from. You can imagine, if you've ever been on a ship before, if you've ever been out in the ocean, or even on a river, when the waters got rough, or when the storms came. It's scary. It's scary to be out there, because you know that's not where you belong.

And so, we can imagine Noah's fear. Just as we're in the midst of this Lent, we can imagine that it was physically taxing for him, emotionally, mentally, even spiritually taxing, wondering if he could really trust in the Lord. Of course, that was his only hope, was to put his trust in God, whom he always trusted in, right. And that was Noah's salvation. At the end of the story, we notice that Noah sends this dove out, and the dove goes and collects an olive branch brought back to the ark and brought back to Noah, which represented that there was new life, that the earth... that the dove had found earth, he had found a tree, he had found dry land, right. And this restored that relationship with Noah and with God, and Noah was now prepared, with hope, to embark in his new creation. He knew that the floods were over. He knew that evil was washed away, and that he had a new responsibility to bring forth new life.

And so, we hear at the end of that story, you can imagine that Noah was just finally just ready for that all to be done, and I think that's how sometimes we spend our Lent. We say "I can't wait for this to be over. Lord, when this suffering will be over. When this penance will be over." And we are waiting for it to be done, and we think that on Easter, right, that time when God comes to create a covenant with us, finally this time will be over, and we can get on with life, right. Just as Noah was probably saying "I can't wait for this to be over so I can get on with life."

But notice what God does. When He brings Noah to that promised land, to that place of hope, He creates a covenant with Noah, right. What is a covenant? A covenant is an exchange of promises, but it's an exchange of persons, right. God gives Himself to Noah, and He says, "I will never do this again." And He gives Himself as a sign of that. "I give My entire life to you, Noah, for your obedience, for your humility, for your faithfulness, for your righteousness." And Noah, in turn, gives himself as the head of all of humanity at that time. Look at what he represents: He's the head of all of humanity, and he says, "I give myself back to You, through this relationship." Right. And so, there's this covenantal relationship that's formed. So, it's not the end. A covenant, a relationship is the beginning of something new. This covenant relationship is when Noah's life truly started, it began again. What an amazing reality, to see that God wants to make, as He says in the book of revelation, "Behold, I make all things new." He wants to make our lives new again. He wants to renew that covenant with us, right.

This is probably most easily seen, I think, through romantic relationships, and especially the pattern by which God speaks to us. And it's seen in humanity. You know, I work with a lot of students here, in the University of Illinois Newman Center, and in this, I see a lot of romantic relationships forming. And during that time, I see that there's this pattern, and it's the pattern of all humanity. It's nothing new. But 2 people are attracted to one another, man and woman, they're attracted to one another, and that attraction leads them to want to get to know one another better. So, then they start to grow, as they start to date, they start to know one another better. And they grow in knowing one another to the point that they say, "I actually think that I love this person, right."

And so, the dating leads to another level of relationship that we call courtship, right. It's an exclusive relationship. And so, they commit themselves on some level to one another, right, and they decide to discern God's will for a covenant relationship. And so, all of this time, they've grown in attraction, and that attraction has led to knowing, and that knowing has led them to love one another. And that loving one another, they get to a point where they're able to trust one another. Trust themselves with the deepest realities of their entire life, with their entire livelihood, and they say "I want to give myself entirely to you. And I want you to give yourself entirely to me."

And they consecrate, literally consecrate that relationship, first by an engagement, which leads to a covenant relationship which we call marriage, or holy matrimony in the sacrament. I often warn couples, as we're going through the marriage prep process, that it's not just about the ceremony, right. And a lot of their time, their time of preparation, it's physically demanding, it's emotionally, it's mentally demanding to even prepare for that ceremony. But we have to be reminded that's not the end. You're about to embark on a covenant relationship with one another, which begins new life, right. And will give new life. And so that time is, that time of preparation, is so that they can live life most successfully, most fully, in the fulfillment of what their hearts were always seeking for, right. That life is given and life is received, right. And so, they live in this covenant relationship.

And so that is also seen, that same relationship is seen in our lives, our lives with our God, and also in the lives of all of those that we see that are going through the RCIA process right now as candidates or catechumens. Basically, as we can review our own lives, we can probably remember, and it would probably be a good exercise during this Lenten season for us to remember our own journey, this pilgrimage that we have back to the Lord. And so, when we do that, we recognize that there was a time of initial attraction to God, right. We notice that there was something that He could offer that our hearts were longing for. There's an attraction there. And through that attraction, we wanted to come to know Him.

And so just like our RCIA candidates are doing now in a very intentional way, we came to know Him through personal prayer, right. We have to have a personal relationship with the person of God. And we also started to build that relationship of knowing Him through study, which is what our RCIA candidates are doing right now. They're studying. And through that study, through that personal relationship, we came to know God so much that we came to love Him, and to be in love with Him, to the point that we would trust Him with our entire lives, and we would give ourselves entire to Him.

And our candidates and catechumens are going to do that in the most profound way on the Easter Vigil this year. They're going to give themselves, and they're going to receive God's very life through covenants. One of those covenants is baptism, right. Receive the life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwelling within us. They receive that through confirmation, God's spirit seal upon them, right, and within them, giving them gifts, and nourishing the gifts of the Holy Spirit within them. And they also receive God's greatest gift, the gift of the Eucharist, the source and the summit of our faith. They receive that covenant of God's life, His body and His blood, that reminds us of the covenant that He has made with us, in which He gives us entirely, He gives us His life. When we're receiving that life, then we are inspired and we are able to give God's life out to the rest of humanity which, in turn, is what married couples share. They share the life of God within them, between them, right.

And so, we see this pattern laid out, right. As if I haven't been already explicit in this, but there's a time of attraction, there's a time of knowing, there's a time of loving, there's a time of trusting. And in that trusting, we embark on a new relationship. But all of that was a time of preparation, a time of preparation to know who we truly were, so that we can fully live resurrected life with our Lord, right. And so, we see Jesus lived that out today in today's gospel. Remember that today's gospel, we hear about Jesus being tempted in the desert. He's there for 40 days and for 40 nights, right, and this is the church's image of what we're doing as we prepare for our public ministry, as it were. We are spending time away to purify our hearts, our minds, our souls, to remember in whom we trust. We're starting to embark on this life, and remember what our lives are all about, so that we may be better prepared for the test of life. And so, we retreat away from everything of this world, and we trust in God alone during this time, and we increase that trust so that we're more fortified to life the resurrected life at the time of Easter.

What did Jesus do immediately before He went out into the desert? We know a few things from the scriptures. We know that, first of all, He set the pattern for us. Jesus was baptized, right. Not that He needed baptism for the forgiveness of sins, like we do, but He had to set the pattern for us, so that we would know that we

need to be baptized. Notice a few things happened during Jesus' baptism that are significant for us as well. When Jesus was baptized, right, He was washed clean with this water, right. Physically, right, washed clean with water, but also spiritually, right. We see that spiritually, what happened, the Father's voice boomed from heaven, revealed Himself as Father, and Jesus as His Son. And the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, right. That dove embodied the Holy Spirit, and showed us what was truly happening in our souls during that time of the covenant of baptism. We become a new creation, right. Notice what happened. The flood waters, harkening back to Noah, the flood waters of our baptism, the flood that wiped away the evil from the earth, that same water, in baptism, washes away our evil, which we call sin, right. It washes the sin, the evil out of our lives, and makes us a new creation. And it's that dove, at the time of Jesus' baptism, that announces the new creation, that is Jesus, who is the fullness of God's life on earth. And it's showing us what we will embark on, that we will receive the fullness of God's life in baptism.

And so, Jesus, now, showing us the way of baptism, He goes out into the desert, right. This time of preparation, this time of purification, this time in which He suffered, right. He suffered physically, He suffered mentally, emotionally, and He trained Himself, He trained Himself, mind body and soul, for the mission that was at hand. Notice what happens after Jesus is in the desert, right. When He's done with that temptation, when He's done with that time of preparation, of retreat, it's not that it's all over then, right. He doesn't just go eat a big meal and say "Man, that was awesome that I did that," right. He goes, and that prepares Him for the mission that is at hand. It prepares Him for covenant, right. It prepares Him for the time that He, in His life, very soon afterwards, right, in 3 years, that He would be tempted, that He would be tempted by the devil once again, that He would be persecuted, that He would go through the worst trials that we can probably never imagine in our own lives, right.

But He was persecuted, He suffered, right, He died a gruesome death, but also He rose again, right. And so that's what it prepared Him for. It prepared Him for the rest of His life. It prepared Him for covenant. So, through that time of preparation, He was prepared for a new relationship with His father and with all of humanity. And that's exactly what we have to remember during this time of Lent, right. It's not a time that we would wish away, right. It's a time that we intentionally put ourselves, as Jesus did, on a retreat. We intentionally heap some suffering upon ourselves, which we call penance, which we call mortification, right, we give of ourselves in alms giving, right, we give our lives, remembering the covenant that we have been made for, the covenant that fulfills our life, right.

And this is a time of preparation for us, not a time that we should wish away, remember. We don't wish it away, because it's preparing us to live the resurrected life. This time of Lent is like a microcosm for the rest of our life. It is a time in which we pull away from the world, we remember in whom we truly trust, and like all of those relationships that I described before, especially those romantic relationships, remember our romantic relationship with the Lord. This relationship of Love. And what we do is we pull ourselves away, we remember how to trust Him once again. And how do we do that? We do that first and foremost by remembering our attraction to God, remember that time that we were first attracted to Him.

And if it's been tough for us to be attracted to God, we pull ourselves into this relationship again, we pull ourselves away so that we can be attracted again. We put ourselves into study, right. We remember the mysteries that God has done in our lives and throughout all of humanity, throughout all of time, that's called Salvation History. We'll read about those things in all of our readings during this Lenten time. And so, we grow to know Him once again. We seek to know Him deeper, so that we can love Him deeper. And that's the next stage. attraction, knowledge of Him, and by knowing Him more we can love Him deeper. And now, loving Him deeper, we place our trust in Him once again. Lord, I trust You with my life. I renew that covenant, right. I renew that covenant that I already had through my baptism, so that when Easter comes, I may be saying "Thank You Lord that this is over, right. Thank You that this preseason is over, so that now we can embark on the season of life," Right.

But I'm also saying, "Thank You Lord, that You have renewed me, You have refreshed me, You have shown me what I have been made for, so that I can now live this resurrected life in You." The covenant begins again. The covenant is embarking on this new relationship. The covenant that we've received so many times in our life, through baptism, through confirmation, through Holy Eucharist, and we renew that covenant every time that we go to confessional as well, we renew our baptismal graces. But now in this Easter time, we remember that covenant that Jesus made for us in His body and His blood, that He has given Himself to us fully. And so, we prepare ourselves by stripping everything away, to prepare ourselves to give ourselves back to Him. And so, may that be our time in this Lenten season to prepare ourselves, this preseason for the season of life, so that we may live in resurrected life most fully. So that we can embark this life most fully at the time of Easter. And give ourselves in imitation of Him, who gives Himself fully to us. May God be praised. Amen.