

WHY FORTY?

We all know (I think) that Lent lasts for forty days – give or take one or two, depending on how you count them. On this First Sunday in Lent in the year of Mark, we hear about the culmination of the forty days of the Great Flood and of Jesus' forty days in the desert. And we all know (I think, once again) that the Israelites are said to have wandered in the desert for forty years before they reached the promised land following their Exodus from Egypt. But, why forty? Did it really rain for forty days in Noah's time? Did Jesus actually fast in the desert for forty days? Did a journey of a couple hundred miles from Egypt to Palestine take forty years – even on foot? The answer to all of those questions is, emphatically, “no!”

So, are the authors of the Old Testament and Mark the Evangelist lying to us? Again, the answer is “no.” In the Semitic culture which permeates the biblical world, there are certain numbers which are considered perfect or are given symbolic meaning: three, seven, twelve (plus multiples of those) and yes, forty. But we'll leave the others aside for now and consider the meaning of “forty” particularly as it applies to the liturgical season we've just begun. Those who have attended the Adult Formation sessions over the past two years can stop reading now – unless you've forgotten or missed the session where we pondered this.

I learned a lot (to say the least) during my theology classes in the seminary, particularly in the Biblical Theology courses; and the meaning of “forty” remains one of the most memorable and useful. Put simply, I learned that “forty” means “as long as it takes to get the job done.” It rained in Noah's day for as long as necessary to cleanse the earth of wickedness (at least for a while!). The Israelites wandered in the desert (basically going around in circles) until they finally learned to abandon their stubbornness and infidelity and turn their lives over to the God who had saved them. And Jesus stayed in the desert for as long as it took for him to fully understand and accept the mission his Father had given him.

And for us in Lent? I think you can figure it out. We all need time to find our way back to a more faithful life – though probably not a perfectly faithful life, which is why we're given these forty days not just once in a lifetime, but every year. That says a great deal about God's ever-present and always available mercy. It also says a great deal about the wisdom of the Church in providing this time of renewal and reconciliation for all of us. May we use these forty days well and find our own way to the promised land of Easter and to a deeper relationship with our loving Creator.

Fr. Bob