

I can still see the empty face of a college buddy the week after his girlfriend told him they were through. His father had just died and grief overwhelmed him. He didn't eat or drink. He lived in an emotional desert. The truth brought a flood of tears. But after the flood, he grew in wisdom about people, and found a new life. Any incident that destroys also carries the possibility of new life. Just ask Noah.

First, let's face it: Noah could have used a better travel agent. Taking a trip with seven other people is risky. If they're your relatives and in-laws it's riskier. Spending forty days and forty nights with them is too much. Doing it on a ship where you can't really get away isn't such a good idea. Sharing the space with animals is asking for trouble. And doing it all in the rain must have been a disaster.

The Bible doesn't tell us how Noah's family felt. We presume they were happy to be saved. But they had just lost their homeland, their possessions, and their friends. God just dropped them on dry ground to start all over again. Were they angry about that? Confused? Was their dry ground an emotional desert? All we know is that after the flood they started life over again.

Why do we hear this story at the beginning of Lent? Today's second reading explains the reason. For the second letter of Peter, the story of Noah is like the story of baptism. The ark resembles a catechumenate. God invites people to forsake a way of life that was familiar, and to journey with others through water toward a new land. Baptism is a spiritual flood which destroys what was home and offers a new one.

As Lent begins we turn to Noah because our catechumens are approaching baptism at Easter, and all of us will renew our baptismal commitment that same day. We will be sprinkled with holy water, the floodwaters of our baptism which destroy evil and create new life.

The readings today mix metaphors of floodwaters and desert. But they remind us that any loss may create new life. We're so sure of this as a Church that every Lent we voluntarily enter a period of emptiness. We bring people a desert. We abstain from meat on Fridays, we silence the Gloria and alleluia at Mass, and we urge people to pray and do charity. For six weeks, if we're not in an emotional desert, the Church invites us into a spiritual one. In a desert we can let go of our needs and re-evaluate our desires. In a desert we will find God. And on Easter the flood of holy water will destroy what was evil and bring us new life.