

Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:3-9, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

“Christ was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also He went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark.”

This is one of my favorite passages in Scripture, when St. Peter writes about the “proclamation to the spirits in prison” – that is, to those “who in former times did not obey.” St. Peter is talking about when Jesus, after His death, went and proclaimed the Gospel to those who had already died.

This is the big event of Holy Saturday – the day between Jesus’ death on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. So I’m always feeling especially celebratory on Holy Saturday, when we remember that Jesus offers the Good News of God’s love to the dead – so that *no one* might miss the message of the Gospel. So that the offer of salvation is truly extended to all.

This event is also known by the excitingly dramatic title of “The Harrowing of Hell.” And that particular phrase makes me imagine something quite intense – I imagine Jesus descending to the dead and just tearing Hell apart.

And that’s not so far from the teaching of the Church. We hear from the writings of the Church Fathers, from the hymns we sing at Easter, that the gate of death, the gate of Hell, has been destroyed. It hangs broken from its hinges, or perhaps trampled to the ground.

There is no longer an impassable barrier between Death and Eternal Life. We are all offered the chance to walk through that passage into eternal bliss and life in friendship with God. Which means that those who might remain in Hell would do so by their own choice to turn away from God.

This teaching of Jesus’ coming to proclaim the Gospel to those who have already died – to those who did not have the opportunity to hear the Gospel during their earthly lives - is so joyful and so *crucial*.

The proclamation of the Gospel to those who have died spreads and makes known the message of God’s love in Christ to humans of every time and place. This is what makes it true that God’s offer of salvation is truly offered to all. All people are given the opportunity to receive and accept salvation.

This is the offer of our God who did not abandon humans after their first sin, but made clothing for them and continued to guide them and be with them.

This is our God who is dedicated to second chances.

This is our God who told Simon Peter to forgive his repentant brother “70 times 7 times.”

I think it appeals to us to know that God gives second chances – that He has mercy on our mistakes. And I think we are even, in general, glad that He gives second chances to *others* who have sinned and wronged us.

More challenging, perhaps, is the idea that God gives 2nd and 3rd, and 4th, and 400th, and 490th chances.

I think our society and the Christian community really does, generally, believe in *second* chances.

We see this for instance, in those who struggle with addiction to alcohol or drugs. When they admit their problem and seek treatment and help, we tend to support them and even cheer them on. We want them to succeed this time at overcoming the temptations of addiction.

But when someone who has sought addiction treatment once relapses, the patience of those around them often wears thin.

A relapse requires giving someone a third chance, and this often stretches the limit of how much we humans, even we Christians, are willing to forgive.

We begin to ask hard *and honest* questions about when support becomes enabling addiction. We ask questions about when we who want to help someone in recovery cross the line into allowing ourselves to be manipulated. Such questions need to be thought about carefully, because enabling manipulation will do more harm than good to everyone involved. Sometimes this even means that those who are most targeted for manipulation have to step back and let others help their struggling loved ones.

And yet we cannot forget that, for those who are truly repentant – who seek healing and life and righteousness - 3rd and 4th and even 400th chances are appropriate and *necessary*. Otherwise there would be no hope for any of us.

As those among us who make regular use of the Sacrament of Confession and Reconciliation know, if you go and confess your sin before a priest, that does not mean you will never do it again. Most of us who go to regular confession come back confessing the same sins time and time again, because they are the particular sins that we most struggle with, or that everyone most struggles with, and there is no snap, easy solution to this inner urge toward sin.

We will continue to struggle with temptation throughout our lives. But if we keep naming those sins aloud, it helps us to recognize our need to turn back to God once more, and to receive His forgiveness.

So thank God for that 490th chance! And for quite a few beyond that. Because we all need them.

All of us on this pilgrimage of Christian life keep turning toward God and falling away. Making progress and then suffering setbacks. Thank God that He is so merciful and patient with us. He does, after all, know what it is to be tempted as a human – He can sympathize with our weakness.

Thank God, also, that He moves the hearts of those around us to be merciful, too, knowing that we are all struggling to turn more and more towards God. Let us pray to God that He might give *us* as much capacity for mercy towards others as He gives our neighbors patience and mercy towards us.

And let us remember this mercy and patience and love especially as we enter the season of Lent. As we examine our consciences a little more closely and realize how *desperately* in need we are of God's mercy and grace. As we strive to turn back towards Him again. And again and again and again.

As we fix our eyes on the Cross, on the broken gate of death, and on the Empty Tomb, that all promise us the hope of everlasting life and joy, if we just keep pressing towards God and trusting His mercy and love.