

1st Sunday of Lent

CYCLE A

READINGS
Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7
Psalms 51:3-6, 12-13, 17
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we confess our sinfulness and acknowledge our many temptations. May your love and grace, given to us through your Son Jesus, strengthen us to live in obedience to your will. Help us to make this season of Lent be a time to draw ever closer to you and to see more clearly your presence in our lives. Amen.

COMMENTARY ON THE WORD OF GOD

The Gospel of the first Sunday of Lent is always an account of the temptation/testing of Jesus in the desert. One of the reasons for this is to remind us of the stark reality of sin in the world and in our lives. The positive message, the Good News, is that the sinless Jesus, taking on our sinful humanity, has opened for us the path of forgiveness and salvation.

THE DESIRE TO BE LIKE GOD

The passage from the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, is a partial account of God's creation of the world. It is in one sense a story, but in fact more than a story; it might be described as a wise and "inspired" reflection on the origin of mankind, sin, and death. Today's passage, omitting the creation of Eve, describes the creation of the man, "Adam," a name similar to the Hebrew word for "earth," thus marking man as an earth creature. In the middle of the garden is the "tree of life," which may indicate that eating of it can result in one's living forever, i.e., becoming a god. The other tree is the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," which implies a mastery of life, something that could never be possessed by a creature made from earth.

Eating from the tree, however, brings the man and woman not wisdom, but shame. Their sin is fundamentally one of disobedience and perhaps the desire, patently futile, to be like God rather than God's creature.

THE NEW LAW/FREEDOM OF CHRIST

In this reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Church in Rome, sin is again seen as disobedience. In this theologically rather dense passage, within a sometimes difficult letter, "Paul reflects on the sin of Adam in the light of the redemptive mystery of Christ."

Paul in his epistles is frequently preoccupied with the relationship of Judaism to Christianity, and this passage is to be understood in that context. The Church in Rome consisted of both Gentile and Jewish Christians, and there was in all likelihood a tension regarding the need to observe Jewish traditions. While not an issue for us today, it was an important question for some of the earliest Christian communities.

It is from this background that Paul contrasts Adam and Christ, seeing Christ on the one hand as the fulfillment and the perfection of Judaism, but also acknowledging the break between the Jewish Law and the new law/freedom of Christ.

Paul compares Adam's sin of disobedience with the obedience of Christ, an act conferring salvation and far outweighing the disobedience of Adam, which resulted in condemnation. St. Paul also seems in this passage to espouse the biblical view that death is a punishment for sin. Thus the consequence of Adam's sin is death, while that of Christ's obedience is eternal life.

What is the precise connection between the sin of Adam and the sins of all human beings? Paul says here that "through one man sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all men, inasmuch as all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Is the statement that "all sinned" merely an observation of Paul about human behavior, or is it an allusion to what we call "original sin," as has sometimes been interpreted? The text provides no clear answer to this, although, at the very least, Adam seems to "model" the sin of all of us.

JESUS AFFIRMS THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

In the scene immediately preceding this passage in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is baptized by John and sees "the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him" (Matt. 3:16b). Now the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Both the desert and the length of Jesus' temptation, forty days and forty nights, recall for us the desert experience

depicted in the book of Exodus, where the Jews spent forty years, and where Moses, ascending Mount Sinai to meet the Lord, fasted forty days and forty nights.

The temptation placed before Jesus by the devil is three-fold: to turn stones into loaves of bread (perhaps recalling the grumbling of the people when they had had their fill of manna), to leap from the parapet of the temple in Jerusalem, and to view the kingdoms of the world from a high mountain. At each temptation, Jesus responds to Satan with quotations from the book of Deuteronomy, chapters six to eight, statements which affirm the sovereignty of God.

Briefly described, Jesus' temptations depict a choice of rebellion against or obedience to the will of God. In the Exodus account, Israel failed their testing in the desert; but at the onset of his ministry, Jesus does not. And again, the notions of obedience/disobedience pervade the reading.

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◆ **SAINT OF THE WEEK** ◆

St. Louise de Marillac

(Feast Day - March 15)

St. Louise knew the pain of suffering; she had lost both parents by the time she was fifteen. She wanted to become a nun but her confessor discouraged her so she got married and had a son. Her husband died after a long illness. Then she began to help Saint Vincent de Paul who worked with the poor and with neglected children. Soon four young women joined her in her work. With St. Vincent's help she wrote a rule and founded the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (Daughters of Charity). Her sisters took care of poor children and worked in hospitals, orphanages, and other places of ministry for the poor. St. Louise had established more than 40 houses in France before she died in 1660. Today her sisters still work among the poor in many countries. Let us imitate her and help those in need.



◆ **MEMORY VERSE** ◆

"One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." **Matthew 4:4b**

◆ **FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS** ◆

Share and/or discuss the following questions.

1. In today's Scripture readings, sin is seen as disobedience. Are there other ways to portray sin? Discuss. Reflecting on my past sins, do I see them as disobedience to God or something else? Share.
2. "To try to understand what sin is, one must first recognize the profound relationship of humans to God, for only in this relationship is the evil of sin unmasked in its true identity." (CCC #386) When I sin, am I conscious of the fact that I am hurting or weakening my relationship to God? Discuss. How does this realization make me feel? Share.
3. Sin affects my relationship to God. How does it affect my relationship to others? Discuss.
4. In the commentary we read that the consequence of Adam's sin is death, while that of Christ's obedience is eternal life. What are my personal feelings toward my own death?
5. Today's Gospel is meant to give the reader (especially the first-time reader) a strong clue as to the identity of Jesus. Would you be willing to say something about the identity and person of Jesus for you personally? Share.
6. Does the liturgical season of Lent make much sense in today's world? Discuss. How do I plan to make these 40 days of Lent a time to draw closer to God and to see more clearly his presence in my life?

* CCC - *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

◇ LIVING AS DISCIPLES ◇

Select one or more of the following actions and be prepared to share your experience with your small group next week.

1. Reflect on the meaning of sin and your relationship with God in preparation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Lent.
2. The saint of the week ministered to the poor and sick. Imitate her by helping someone in need.
3. Throughout Lent contribute to Catholic Relief Services (CRS) through Operation Rice Bowl.
4. Make a special effort to spend time in prayer reflecting on God's presence in your life.
5. Write a poem or prayer to Jesus telling him who he is in your life.
6. Pray the Memory Verse each day.

◇ CLOSING PRAYER & RITUAL ◇

Gather around a prayer table with a Bible, crucifix, a lit candle, a flat stone for each person and permanent markers.

Leader: Loving God, by reflecting on your word and sharing our experiences with one another, we come to know your great love for us.

Reader: The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." He said in reply, "It is written: One does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Matt: 4:4b)

Each person will take a stone and using a marker write on the rock a life-giving word that is significant for him or her. After everyone has had an opportunity to do this, participants may volunteer to share his/her word and the significance it holds for them.

All: Lord, you are the Word of Life, the Incarnate Word. Help us to be attentive to your word in the Scriptures, in our hearts, in others, and in the world around us. Amen.

Share a sign of peace with one another. Rocks may be taken home as a reminder of the importance of listening to God's word on our Lenten journey.