

Lent Cycle A



Week 1: Temptation in the Desert

Introduction

Lent is our season of repentance and this first Sunday begins the season properly by reminding us that we live in a state of sin. But it also reminds us that there is a way out. The sin that came upon us through Adam can be taken away by the New Adam, Jesus, if we listen to his call to repentance.

For that reason, we'll hear the story of how sin came into the world through Adam and Eve. We'll hear St. Paul explain how that sin was passed down to all their descendants—in other words every human being. Christ undoes what Adam did, obeying instead of disobeying, giving us the escape route the whole world has been looking for.

Finally, we hear the story of Christ's own temptation in the wilderness. He demonstrates the obedience Paul talked about the responses Adam and Eve ought to have given when they were tempted in Eden.

The consciousness of our sin weighs heavy on us during Lent. The Psalm we sing today has long been a favorite response of sinners who know they have sinned. Psalm 51 was written by David after Nathan had confronted him with his own sin: a pretty bad sin at that, since David had arranged for a man to be killed so he could have the man's wife. We call this Psalm the Miserere, after its first word in Latin (*Miserere*, "Have mercy"). Be sure to notice as you are singing the Psalm how perfectly it fits the theme of today's first reading.



Old Testament Reading: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

New Testament Reading: Romans 5:12-19

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned—sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Points to Ponder

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Our first reading comes from Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The name “Genesis” is the Greek word for “beginning,” and Genesis tells the story of the beginnings of everything we read about in the rest of the Bible; the world, the human race, the nations of the world, and in particular the nation of Israel. This passage also tells us the story of one of the most puzzling beginnings of all, the beginning of sin.

We all ask questions. Why is there evil in the world and why does God permit it? Is it God’s fault? What can we do about it? Genesis answers them with the story of the first man and the first woman. The first part of our story sets the scene. God created man and created a beautiful garden full of every delightful thing for him to live in.

The reading for Mass must be a reasonable length so we will examine additional verses so that we don’t miss some of the context. In the Genesis story, after creating the man, Adam (a word that came to mean “man” in Hebrew) and creating the Garden of Eden, God puts the man in the garden giving him one simple instruction:

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Immediately after that, God declared, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” God created all the animals, but one by one Adam discovers that none of them will do for a helper.

“So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”

In this section of Genesis we see the beginning of marriage, a partnership of two of the same kind of creature. No beast was a suitable “helper” for Adam. God had to create woman from the same stuff as man, so that he would recognize her as another of the same kind. And they “were both naked, and were not ashamed,” because shame comes in only where there is something to be ashamed of. There was no sin in the Garden of Eden—not yet.

The second part of our reading deals with the temptation by the serpent, Satan!

How do we know the serpent is Satan? Most of us probably don’t even ask that question—we’ve associated the serpent with Satan since the first time we heard this story. In fact Genesis doesn’t tell us explicitly who the serpent was. The serpent’s identity is revealed at the other end of the Bible—in the Book of Revelation, where he is called “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:1).

Satan argues with Eve first. She is reluctant: she remembers what God said about the fruit, and it takes some fast-talking from Satan to overcome her reluctance. She then hands some of the fruit to Adam and he compliantly takes and eats it. “*Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.*” Now they know the difference between good and evil because they know they

have done evil and they were ashamed of being seen by God. The only reason shame occurs to them is because they have fallen.

They have sinned: they have broken God's commandment, and (as we know) he will drive them out of paradise. But worse than losing paradise is losing the relationship of perfect trust and love they once had with God. How can what they have broken ever be repaired? This is the central problem in the history of humanity. And the rest of today's readings will tell us the solution.

Do we take this story in Genesis literally? The Catholic Church actually has no official position on that. The Catechism tells us that the writers of Genesis used "figurative language" (CCC 390) in writing about the Fall but they were writing about a thing that really happened: our ancestors' fall from grace. Scripture tells us the moral and theological truth of our humanity: that we were created in the image of God, that we were created good, and that we fell from grace through our own sin. To be Catholic, we must believe these things—but we have the freedom to investigate human beginnings as much as we like within those assumptions. Many Catholics accept scientific theories of human evolution, and interpret Genesis figuratively. Others believe that the accounts in Genesis are literally true history. Both can be good Catholic Christians. The important thing is to understand the moral and theological truth, and that is the only thing the Church insists on.

Romans 5:12-19

St. Paul tells us, the answer to the problem of sin, is the obedience of Jesus Christ. Adam, Paul says, "was a type of the one who was to come." The word "type" comes from a Greek word meaning "image" or "model," like the image left when you press a seal into clay or wax or when you press an inked letter into a page. When we talk about a "type" in Scripture, we usually mean something in the Old Testament that is an image or model for something in the New Testament. Theologians use the word *typology* to describe the study of these "types."

For example, we say that Noah's Flood is a "type" of our baptism. Like the waters of the Flood, baptism washes away sin, leaving us a purified new creation. In the same way, we say that the Exodus from Egypt is a "type" of our redemption through Christ. Israel was freed from bondage to the power of Egypt, and we are freed from bondage to the power of sin. The Old Testament event foreshadows a greater fulfillment in the New Testament.

In Paul's comparison of Adam and Jesus, the image is something like a mirror image. Christ undoes what Adam did. Adam sinned and disobeyed the Lord; Jesus Christ obeyed even to death on the cross. Adam's sin brings death; Christ's obedience brings life.

"How is he a type?" someone will ask. Why, in that, as Adam became to those who were sprung from him—although they had not eaten of the tree—the cause of that death which by his eating was introduced, so too did Christ become to those sprung from Him, even though they had not wrought righteousness, the Provider of that righteousness which through his cross he graciously bestowed on us all.

—*St. John Chrysostom, Homily 10 on Romans*

We are all born tainted by sin because of our first parents' transgression: that's what we mean when we talk about the doctrine of *original sin*. By sending his Son to undo that damage, God redeems us from sin. It doesn't happen because we were very good and finally deserved life instead of death; it happens because God chooses to give us a gift—freely, out of his own overflowing love. When we are baptized, the long chain of sin that ties us to Adam and Eve is broken, as St. Augustine explains:

"By the water that holds forth the sacrament of grace in its outward form, and by the Spirit who bestows the benefit of grace in its inward power, canceling the bond of guilt, and restoring the goodness of nature, the man, who derived his first birth originally from Adam alone, is regenerated in Christ alone."
—*St. Augustine, Letter 98, 2*

We are given a chance to be born all over again in Christ and because of that gift, we are no longer slaves to sin and death. St. Aphrahat has a colorful and dramatic interpretation of St. Paul's phrase, "death reigned from Adam to Moses." He imagines a personified Death trembling before the declaration, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

"And why did he say, "death reigned from Adam to Moses"? Who is so ignorant as to imagine that only from Adam to Moses has death reigned?

Yet we should understand from what he said here: "death spread to all men." Thus, death spread to all from Moses until the world ends.

Yet Moses preached that its kingdom is made void.

For when Adam broke the commandment by which the sentence of death was passed upon his progeny, Death hoped that he would bind fast all the sons of man and would be king over them for ever. But when Moses came, he proclaimed the resurrection, and Death knew that his kingdom is to be made void.

For Moses said, "Let Reuben live, and not die, nor let his men be few" [Deuteronomy 33:6]. And when the Holy One called Moses from the bush, he said this to him: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" [Exodus 3:6].

When Death heard this utterance, he trembled and feared and was terrified and was greatly disturbed, and knew that he had not become king forever over the children of Adam. From the hour that he heard God saying to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," Death wrung his hands, for he learned that God is King of the dead and of the living, and that it is appointed to the children of Adam to come forth from his darkness and rise with their bodies.

And observe that our Redeemer Jesus also, when he repeated this saying to the Sadducees, when they were arguing with him about the resurrection of the dead, said this: "Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him" [Luke 20:38]."
—*St. Aphrahat, Demonstration 22, 2*

This is very much in keeping with St. Paul's typological interpretation of the Old Testament. The Fathers of the Church, like the apostles and Jesus himself, saw the events and sayings in the Old Testament as foreshadows of the great things that were to come in the age of the Messiah.

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus goes through the same temptation that our first parents went through. Notice how the devil's technique hasn't changed in all those thousands of years. He still deals in half-truths and lofty promises of God-like power. He's even still using food as a temptation.

That's the devil's first try, temptation number one out of three. Jesus has been out in the desert for a long time. He's a human being: he has to be hungry but he can fix that, can't he? He's the Son of God. He has all the power in the world. God spoke the universe into being; it shouldn't be hard to command a few stones to turn into bread.

Hunger and loneliness are powerful things, and St. John Chrysostom was convinced that the devil was especially apt to make use of them.



You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.

"And look where the Spirit led him when he had taken him: not into a city and forum, but into a wilderness. That is, because he wanted to attract the devil, he gives him a handle not only by his hunger, but also by the place. For the devil attacks people most especially when he sees them left alone and by themselves. In just the same way he set upon the woman in the beginning, having caught her alone, and found her apart from her husband—just as when he sees us with others and banded together, he is not equally confident, and makes no attack. Thus we have the greatest need for this very reason to be flocking together continually, so that we may not be open to the devil's attacks."

—*St. John Chrysostom*
Homily 13 on Matthew

Jesus refuses to give in to temptation. There are things more important than his hunger: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." He will not be tempted away from obedience to his Father by the grumbling in his stomach. As St. Irenaeus points out, it is here that Jesus is in effect reversing the Fall by giving the answer Adam and Eve ought to have given: "Thus the corruption of man, which happened in paradise by both Adam and Eve eating, was done away with by his lack of food in this world." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.2.)

The second temptation asks Jesus to prove that he really is the Son of God. The devil takes him to "the pinnacle of the temple," which was certainly the

tallest man-made thing in Jerusalem at the time. Depending on exactly what Matthew means by the "pinnacle," Jesus could easily have been at the height of a small skyscraper.

Why shouldn't he just throw himself off? Wouldn't that be a spectacular way to prove he was the Son of God? Everyone would believe he was the Messiah if they actually saw the angels bearing him up.

"Why is it that at each temptation he adds this, "If you are the Son of God?" He is doing much the same thing he did in the former case. That is, just as he then slandered God, saying, "when you eat of it your eyes will be opened," thereby intending to signify, that they were beguiled and overreached, and had received no benefit; even so in this case also he insinuates this same thing, saying, "In vain God has called you Son, and has beguiled you with his gift. If that isn't true, give us some clear proof that you have that power." Then, because Christ had reasoned with him from Scripture, he also brings in a testimony of the prophet." —*St. John Chrysostom Homily 13 on Matthew*

Again Christ refuses. So the devil tries one last time. Showing him all the kingdoms of the earth, the devil offers them all to him, on one condition: Christ must fall down and worship him. Power is as tempting as food—even more so, perhaps, because power is very tempting to good people. Think of all the good you could do if you were made dictator of the earth! Doubtless every dictator has thought the same thing. Think of all the good I could do if only I had power—and then, think of all the good I could still accomplish if only I stayed in power.

Christ knows that earthly power is not what he is here for. In fact, he can only accomplish his mission by becoming utterly powerless. So he dismisses the devil, and then—only after all the temptations are over—angels come to serve him.

Lenten Moment

Resisting temptation

Catholics have a tradition of giving up something for Lent. In addition to the fasts prescribed by our tradition, people will often pick one particular thing they like and give it up as a sign of repentance. Some people give up chocolate; others might give up television. It's a way of reminding ourselves that "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." But are we giving up what really tempts us? Think about it. If you're really, really into television, did you decide to give up chocolate? If you really, really care whether people think you look good, did you decide to give up fattening foods? The devil is very clever with his temptations. He even quotes Scripture to tempt Christ. He can easily convince us to give in to the things that really tempt us while giving up a few things we don't really care about nearly as much.

So how do we resist temptation like that? St. Augustine suggests that we should look at the temptation of Christ, not just for general inspiration but also to imitate Christ's example of resisting temptation.

Learn from the temptation of Christ. If we listen to his answers to the devil, so that we may answer the same way when we ourselves are tempted, we are then *entering through the gate*, as you have heard it read in the Gospel. What does it mean to enter by the gate? To enter by Christ, who himself said, "I am the door" (John 10:7). And to enter through Christ is to imitate his ways.

—*Augustine, Exposition on Psalm 91*

Catechism Connections

- To understand more about how important it is to acknowledge the fact of sin, see CCC 386-387.
- To find out more about how the Church understands the story of the Fall in Genesis, see CCC 389.
- To understand the nature of Adam and Eve's sin, see CCC 397-398.
- To learn more about the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin, see CCC 402-406.
- To understand Christ's obedience better, see CCC 606-612.
- To learn more about how baptism washes away sin, see CCC 977-980.

Rome to Home

The Council of Trent solemnly expressed the Church's faith concerning original sin. In the previous catechesis we considered that Council's teaching in regard to the personal sin of our first parents. Now we wish to reflect on what the Council said about the consequences of that sin for humanity.

In this regard the Tridentine decree states first of all:

Adam's sin has passed to all his descendants, that is, to all men and women as descendants of our first parents, and their heirs, in human nature already deprived of God's friendship.

The Tridentine decree (cf. DS 1512) explicitly states that Adam's sin tainted not only himself but also all his descendants. Adam forfeited original justice and holiness not only for himself, but also "for us" (*nobis etiam*).

Therefore he transmitted to the whole human race not only bodily death and other penalties (consequences of sin), but also sin itself as the death of the soul (*peccatum quod mors est animae*). ...

The Tridentine decree contains another statement: Adam's sin is transmitted to all his descendants by generation and not merely by way of bad example. The decree states: "This sin of Adam, which by origin is unique and transmitted by generation and not by way of imitation, is present in all as proper to each" (DS 1513).

Therefore original sin is transmitted by way of natural generation. This conviction of the Church is indicated also by the practice of infant baptism, to which the conciliar decree refers. Newborn infants are incapable of committing personal sin, yet in accordance with the Church's centuries-old tradition, they are baptized shortly after birth for the remission of sin. The decree states: "They are truly baptized for the remission of sin, so that what they contracted in generation may be cleansed by regeneration" (DS 1514).

In this context it is evident that original sin in Adam's descendants does not have the character of personal guilt. It is the privation of sanctifying grace in a nature which has been diverted from its supernatural end through the fault of the first parents. It is a "sin of nature," only analogically comparable to "personal sin." In the state of original justice, before sin, sanctifying grace was like a supernatural "endowment" of human nature. The loss of grace is contained in the inner "logic" of sin, which is a rejection of the will of God, who bestows this gift. Sanctifying grace has ceased to constitute the supernatural enrichment of that nature which the first parents passed on to all their descendants in



6. In Matthew's account, what was the second temptation?

7. Again in Matthew's account, what was the third temptation?



Notes