

1st Sunday in Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7
<i>Response</i>	Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 5:12-19
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 4:1-11

With this Sunday we begin our study of the readings for the holy season of Lent. Over the course of the next six Sundays, the Church is going to stop reading the Gospel in the way we've been doing it up to this point during Ordinary Time, and start choosing the readings according to some different principles. So before I get into the actual Gospel text for this week, let me just make a couple of points about how Lent is different than Ordinary Time. So if you remember, during Ordinary Time we've been working through the Gospel of Matthew in order, chapter by chapter, and the Old Testament readings for those Sundays during Ordinary Time were chosen to correlate with the Gospel. In Lent, the readings are chosen differently. During the Lenten season, we are going to have six weeks of Gospel readings where the Church has picked particular passages from the Gospels that point forward to, or prepare us for, the passion, the death and the resurrection of Christ. So it's a different ordering system, and during that time the Church also is choosing the Old Testament readings differently. So if you keep your eye on the Old Testament over the course of the next six weeks, you'll notice that the Old Testament readings are in the order of the history of salvation. So there is not always going to be a one-to-one correlation between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel during the Lenten season. The readings are chosen more according to the idea of thematic correspondence with Lent. So certain passages that are going to be important to prepare us for Easter are what the Church is going to give us as the primary focus of our attention. So if you keep that in mind over the course of the next six weeks, you'll see clearly just how amazing these readings are

for Lent. They really are some of the most powerful and important Gospels in the entire New Testament.

So just to illustrate that, let's look at the first Sunday of Lent — which is one of my favorite passages in all of the Gospels. It is the story of the temptations of Jesus, the three temptations of Jesus in the desert. Because this year is Year A, we are going to look at Matthew's account of Jesus' temptations in the desert. Every year, the first Sunday of Lent is always on the temptations of Christ in the desert. So here's the gospel for this first Sunday. Matthew 4:1-11 says this:

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.¹

There is so much we could talk about with this particular passage here. I want to just highlight a few key questions that are critical for our understanding not just of this Gospel, but why the Church chooses it for the first Sunday of Lent every single year. So let's look at a couple things. First, notice the fact that Jesus goes out into the desert to be tempted by the devil. So why is he in the desert being tested by the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

devil? Number two, notice that he fasts not just for any period, but for 40 days and 40 nights. So what's the significance of 40 days and 40 nights? And I know what you're probably thinking here, you're probably thinking "well that's Lent" because Lent is a 40 day period. And that's true, but the question is what would it have meant in the first century A.D.? What would a Jew have understood by 40 days and 40 nights? What was the significance of the number 40? And then number three, the third key question I want to ask is, what is the nature of these particular temptations? In other words I will put it this way, why these three temptations? You might have noticed here — it is very clear — that there are three key temptations that the devil levies against Jesus, to which Jesus responds, notice, by quoting the Bible. Every time he responds to the devil he quotes the Scriptures, "it is written...it is written...it is written." So the question becomes, why these three temptations and not some other temptations? What is the significance of this exchange between Jesus and Satan? So let's walk through each one of those together here.

First, let's begin with the image of Jesus being led into the desert to be tempted by the devil. The first thing I would highlight here is that anytime you see an image of going out into the desert, for a first century Jew, that would call to mind the exodus from Egypt. When the Israelites were set free from bondage to Pharaoh at the time of Moses, they didn't just go straight to the promised land, they went through the waters of the Red Sea and out into the desert, the Sinai desert, and they were there for 40 years. During that time they were tested, they were tempted to sin, they were tempted to rebel against God, it was a period of testing and purification before they got to the promised land. So the first point here is that Jesus here is kind of inaugurating a new Exodus and he's like Israel in person. He's going out into the desert. He has already passed through the waters of his baptism, which was just narrated Matthew 3. Now he goes out in the desert, and just like Israel was in the desert for 40 years, he's going to be in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. And during that time, it will be a time of testing, temptation and struggling with the devil. So that's the imagery here, a new Exodus with Jesus as the new Israel. That is the first point.

The second point here is what is the significance of the symbolism of the 40 days and 40 nights? Well I think you can already see it just by making a connection with the exodus. Whenever you see the number 40 in the Bible, it's always a sign

or a symbol for a time of trial, a time of temptation or testing and purification. So those are the two themes, 40 symbolizes testing and purification from sin. Just to give you a couple of examples, Noah's flood in Genesis 7-8 is 40 days and 40 nights of rain. What does the rain do? Well it puts Noah's faith to the test, but it is also a time of purification, cleansing the world from the sin of violence. Another time, Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai, where he is being purified so that he can enter into the presence of God on top of the mountain and receive the 10 Commandments, the law of God, and then bring it to his people. That is in Exodus 24. I already mentioned Israel was in the desert for 40 years, again a time of testing but also a purification from sin. And then finally, Elijah is in the desert, the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19, when he's fleeing from Jezebel and he is left alone in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights on his journey to Mount Sinai in order to prepare to meet God. This is when he hears the still small voice and during which time he's ministered to by the birds. The birds bring him bread and whatnot. So every time you see 40, it's always a time of trial, a time of purification and a time of testing. So what Jesus is doing here is, in a sense, reenacting all of the 40s from the Old Testament, all of those periods of testing and purification, but now he's going to carry them out in himself and he's going to fulfill them in himself. So he is beginning this new Exodus in the desert, where he is going to do battle with the devil, a very very important key concept there.

So now with that in mind, with that context in mind, what then is the nature of these particular temptations? Why does the devil tempt Jesus in this way and are they real temptations? That is one of the questions my students often have. Well if Jesus is divine, if he's the son of God, then can he really be tempted? I mean he is God after all, so are these real temptations? So let's look at each one of them here. The first temptation is the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. Well why does he do that and is that a real temptation? We will take the latter question first. If you ask the question is it a real temptation, you can simply answer it very easily by saying was Jesus fully human? The answer is yes, right, so he was fully human and he experienced the desires of the human body and, as Matthew said here, he's fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, so would he have been hungry? The answer is yes, especially when he's fasting not like we do, maybe in an air-conditioned home, but in the desert, right, he's out in the desert in the heat and he's giving up food here and so his natural desire of his human nature would be to satisfy his hunger with food. So the devil tempts him precisely in that regard and

says “if you are the son of God then just change the stones into bread and fill your belly, eat your fill.” Jesus resists that temptation by saying “man doesn't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” So although he would've experienced a real desire for food, he overcomes that desire by quoting the Scriptures, by quoting the Old Testament. So that is the first point.

Another temptation here — I'll skip down to the third one here — this one is interesting, it says “the devil took him to a high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and all of their glory; and he says ‘I'll give this to you if you just worship me.’” Now you might ask, “is that a real temptation?” Well yes I think it is because if you think about it, what the devil is basically showing Jesus is all of the souls of all humanity. In other words, all the kingdoms of the world is all the people of the world. And as the devil says in Luke's account of the temptation, “all these kingdoms have been given to the devil and he can give them to whoever he wills.” In other words, the devil is, in a sense, the prince of this world. That is what Jesus calls him elsewhere. So the devil is saying “look, I can give you all the kingdoms of the world. All you have to do is worship me.” Now why would that be a temptation for Jesus? Well because if you look at Jesus' mission in the Gospel of Matthew, what is he coming to the world to do? He has come into the world to take back all of the souls of all of humanity from the power of the devil. He's come into the world to deliver them from the dominion of Satan. And what Satan is saying to Jesus here is “you can have all kingdoms of the world. No problem. One small price. Just take a knee, just genuflect, just bow before me and worship me and I'll give them to you; and all with no cross.” In other words, “you don't have to go to Calvary, you don't have to suffer, there is no suffering involved, just worship me.” So what the devil is appealing to here is Jesus' desire to take the kingdoms of the world back from the devil — which is what he's come to do — but to do it without the cross, to do it without suffering. And what does Jesus respond to him? Once again he just quotes the Bible, “you should only worship the Lord your God and him alone shall you serve.”

And then finally, the third one I will look at here is when the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and says “if you're really the son of God then throw yourself down because ‘he will give his angels charge of you.’” Now I have to say something real quick here. This is a really interesting temptation because in it, the devil quotes Scripture also. We have seen that Jesus is quoting Scripture, so the

devil gets into the game and he quotes Psalm 91, which does in fact say that “God will give his angels charge of you and they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone.” But what is interesting about this Psalm in a first century Jewish context, is that the Psalm was also the Psalm of exorcism. So in other words, Psalm 91 was the Psalm that Jewish exorcists would sing when they were casting out demons. They used this Psalm to cast out the devil. So it is kind of funny. I like to tell my students sometimes that “the devil knew this Psalm really well,” he had heard it before in other words. So he takes a couple of the verses out of context and then he throws them back at Jesus. So is this a real temptation? Well I think yes because what the devil is basically doing is trying to tell Jesus to commit the sin of pride. In other words, he's trying to say “if you're really the son of God then why don't you just prove it. Go to the top of the Temple where everybody can see you and show everyone your power. Leap off the Temple and levitate in midair. Let the Angels bear you up and then you will be able to show the whole city of Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish people, that you are in fact the son of God, that you are in fact the Messiah.” But what does Jesus say, “you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” In other words, Jesus has not come into this world to prove his power by the grand display of a miracle that would force everyone to recognize he's the divine son of God. Instead what he is going to do is use signs, parables, riddles and then finally the most mysterious riddle of all, which is the riddle of the cross, to reveal that the way this Messiah reigns is through the love of his passion, through suffering and his death, and then finally his resurrection. So Jesus takes the path of humility in following the father's plan, rather than the devil's temptation here to prove to everyone publicly that he is the son of God.

So with all that in mind, there is one other thing I want to say here about it. For a first century Jew, the three temptations of Jesus in the desert would've also called to mind another episode in which a person was tempted with three temptations. That is the fall of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis, which just so happens to be the first reading for the first Sunday of Lent in Year A. So let's go back to the first reading in the book of Genesis and we will correlate it with the temptations of Jesus in the desert here. So for the First Sunday of Lent, the Church has us read from Genesis 2 and 3, and here what we have is an account of the creation and fall of Adam and Eve. This is what it says, Genesis 2, verses 7 and following says:

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 it skips ahead to the account of fall, Genesis 3:1

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."

Okay, pause there for one second because we are about to get an important point, but I want to highlight a couple things. First, what we just saw described here was the creation of man. In the Hebrew, the word for man is '*adam*, that's where we get the name Adam from. So this is the account of the creation of Adam. Secondly, it's also the account of Adam in Paradise. So when the Hebrew word here says that "God planted a garden in Eden," the actual Greek word for garden is *paradeisos*. It literally means an orchard or a garden, so that when we say the word paradise, we are actually using the Greek word for garden or for orchard. So this is an account of man in paradise, which contains these two trees, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. Thirdly here, notice, the lectionary moves us into the account of the serpent who is going to tempt the woman, later known as Eve, while they're in the garden (paradise) to eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Now as the book of Revelation 12 makes clear, the serpent is none other than Satan, the devil, appearing under the form of a serpent in Genesis 3. So once you have those three key elements in mind, the context is of Adam and Eve in Paradise being tempted by the serpent, now look at the next verse, because the next verse is

going to show us something really fascinating. It's going to show us what any first century Jew would've known, but what many modern Christians forget. Namely this, that there were three reasons for the fall, there were three temptations that Adam and Eve experienced in the book of Genesis chapter 3. So why did they fall? What were the reasons for the fall? A lot of times people like to speculate on that, like “how could they possibly have fallen if they were in the paradise in a state of grace” and things like that. Well Genesis tells you. It says the reasons for the fall were threefold and here it, Genesis 3:6

So when the woman saw that the tree was [number 1] good for food, and [number 2] that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be [number 3] 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.

That is the end of the first reading. So what's important about the first reading for us in this particular Sunday is those three reasons for the fall. That the fruit was “good for food,” that it was “a delight to the eyes,” and that it was “desirable to make one wise.” Why is that important? Well because ancient Jews recognize those three reasons for the fall as kind of like the three root causes of all of the sins in the world. They actually had a concept of what later was going to be called the triple concupiscence, or the threefold lust, this idea of these three disordered desires to go all the way back to Adam and Eve and to the fall in the book of Genesis 3. We actually see this idea of a triple lust in the letter of 1 John. This is not one of the readings for the week, but I think it will help you understand the readings for the week. So in 1 John 2:16, John describes this triple lust or this triple concupiscence, in other words, a threefold disordered desire, and he says this:

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever.

So that's the threefold lust: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Well what do those mean? So if you correlate these three with the three temptations of Adam and Eve, you can see that they go together. The lust of the flesh is the disordered desire for pleasure, so like when Eve sees the fruit, she saw that it was “good for food.” That's the lust of the flesh, her desire to eat of that fruit even though it had been forbidden, so the desire for the pleasure of eating. Second, the lust of the eyes, goes back to Eve seeing the fruit, that it wasn't just good for fruit, but that it was a “delight to the eyes.” In other words, it was beautiful, it was some good-looking fruit. So she saw it and even though it didn't belong to her, she wanted to possess it. So the lust of the flesh is the disordered desire for pleasure and the lust of the eyes is a disordered desire to possess things that don't belong to us. And then finally, the pride of life, St. John describes, goes back to the third reason. Eve took of the fruit because it was “desirable to make one wise.” What does that mean? In other words, to make one wise like God. Because what the devil said to her was “you will not die when you eat of it, the day you eat of it you will become like God,” or in the Hebrew literally like *Elohim* (plural), you will become like gods. So there's a temptation there to be like God but apart from God. So this is what we call the sin of pride or vanity. So those are the three temptations: pleasure, possessions and pride or vanity. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.

If you pause and think about that for a second, St. John here is really profound in his insight because any sin — just think of any sin — you can imagine can be traced back to those three root desires, those disordered desires. So the lust of the flesh or desire of pleasure, that can deal with gluttony, with sexual sin (adultery, fornication, rape, you name it), or drug abuse. Any kind of abuse where a person gives himself over to disorders for pleasure, that's the lust of the flesh. Secondly, the lust of the eyes, a disordered desire for possessions. Think of all the theft that goes on in the world. Every time someone steals or robs someone else, that's the lust of the eyes. You see something that belongs to someone else and you desire it so you take it from them, whether by force or by stealth, or whatever it is. So that desire for possessions leads to a host of sins: money-laundering, corruption, you name it. Lust of the eyes is the desire to take from others. And finally, the pride of life, the sin of vanity, the sin of pride. That's really the deepest of all the sins, because all the other sins are rooted in a disordered self-love whereby we would desire power over others, whether to harm them or hurt them, to rule over them or

to abuse them. Whatever it is, pride is the root cause of all the other sins, and it's really ultimately a disordered love of self where we put ourselves in the place of God. When we act like we are God and he is not. This was of course the devil's great sin and the fall of the angels. So any sin in human experience goes back to these three that are given to us in the first reading for this day in the book of Genesis.

So what does all of that have to do with Jesus? Well if you look now back at the Gospel, what is Jesus doing in the desert? He's not just the new Israel out in the wilderness, he's also a new Adam. So whereas Adam was tempted in the garden of paradise, now Jesus, the new Adam, is tempted in the desert, because that's what our sin has done, it's turned the paradise of creation into a desert. And just like Adam was tempted by the devil in the book of Genesis, now Jesus is tempted by the devil in the desert in the Gospel. And just as Adam had three temptations: lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh and pride of life; so too now the devil hits Jesus with the same three temptations. The stone into bread is the lust of the flesh, but unlike Adam, Jesus conquers it and says "man doesn't live by bread alone but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." The lust of the eyes is the desire to possess all the kingdoms of the world. How many people want to possess all the wealth and all the kingdoms of the world? What does Jesus say to that? He rejects the temptation, unlike Adam, he passes the test. And then finally, the temptation to pride, to prove that he is really the son of God. So the devil says "well if you're really the son of God, go to the Temple and show every body. Forget this humility stuff, fasting alone by yourself in the desert where nobody can see your power and nobody can see your glory, go up to the top of the Temple and prove it." And Jesus says "you shall not put the Lord your God to the test." So each one of those temptations is overcome, and Jesus, in a sense, mortifies the triple lust, the triple concupiscence, the disordered desire for pleasure, for possessions and for power or pride. So the new Adam succeeds where the old Adam fails, the new Adam conquers the devil where the old Adam was conquered by the devil, and he does it during these 40 days in the desert when he's tempted at the beginning of his ministry.

So what does all this have to do with the season of Lent? Well as the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us in paragraphs 538 - 540, that during the 40 days of

Lent, what the Church is actually doing — and I am actually going to quote it here — is this:

By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert.

So what are we really supposed to be doing during Lent? Well we are going out into the desert with Jesus to do battle with the devil, to fight against temptation, to be tested through a time of trial and be purified. And so the question becomes, how do we do that during Lent? Now for most of us, if you are like me, and you grew up in the United States in a contemporary context, Lent tends to be simply reduced to a time of abstinence; like I am going to give up chocolate for Lent or I am going to give up coffee for Lent, or I am going to give up alcohol for Lent or whatever it is, or even sometimes people tend to make it into a time to lose weight and start exercising for Lent. Those can be noble goals, they can be good things. Abstinence is a great way to do penance, but actually what the Church calls us to do during Lent is three things: to pray, to fast and to give alms. And if you remember if you went to mass on Ash Wednesday, the readings for Ash Wednesday, the very beginning of Lent, were Jesus' teachings from the Sermon on the Mount about fasting, almsgiving and prayer. This is in Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus' teaching on "when you fast, don't tell everybody you're doing it...when you give alms, do it in secret...when you pray, go in your room and do it in secret." So those three directives: prayer, fasting and almsgiving, were the commands for the season of Lent. Well why did the Church give that to us on Ash Wednesday? Because that's what we are supposed to be doing during Lent, because those three commands correlate to Jesus's three temptations in the desert.

Think about it for a second. Jesus fasted during 40 days, so he calls us to fast. Why? To overcome our disordered desire for pleasure. So if you have a problem with addiction to pleasure, whether it be food or drink or sexual pleasure, whatever it might be (like pornography addiction for example), what's the remedy for that? Fast, because fasting helps you to control and to mortify, to put the death that disordered inclination to pleasure. Secondly, if you have a disordered desire to acquire money or possessions, what do you do? Give alms, give to the poor, because it mortifies, or puts to death, that disordered desire to possess things. So Lent should be a season where we are particularly intentional about giving to the

poor, giving to the Church, giving to those in need. So if you have too much money, if you have too many things, if you are attached to them, give them away and it will help you grow in freedom from that particular sin. And then finally, if you have a disordered love of self, the sin of pride or vanity, what should you do during Lent? Pray, because prayer is like poison to pride. It kills pride at the root by helping us to grow in humility, because whenever we get on our knees and pray, we are by definition recognizing that God is God and we are not, that we are his creatures, that we need his help and that we need his grace. So if you correlate the readings for Ash Wednesday with the readings for the first Sunday in Lent, the Church is giving us Jesus's directives here during Lent. It is very simple. What do we want to do? We want to pray more, we want to fast more and we want to give alms more to the poor, so that we can unite ourselves to the mystery of Jesus in the desert. And I promise you that if this Lent you take on the challenge of not just abstaining from something you like, but really commit yourself to maybe one day of fasting during the week, or even two days or more, whatever it is that you need to do, to giving alms and to praying more frequently with more intensity, I promise you will see that this Lent will be a different Lent. It will be grace filled, it is going to be a time where you really are united in a closer way to Jesus and to the mystery of Jesus in the desert.

So that's why the Church gives us this reading. It is a beautiful and powerful way to start off the Lenten season. And as you will see over the course of the next six weeks, it's going to get more and more intense as we get closer and closer to Calvary. Because ultimately, it's going to be on the cross where Jesus completely overcomes those three temptations, because he is going to go to the cross and he is going to suffer. He is going to feel the depths of a lack of pleasure in the pain of the crucifixion. He is going to overcome our desire for possessions, because he is going to go to the cross with absolutely nothing to his name, even his clothes will be taken from him when he is on the cross on Calvary. Even his mother, his beloved mother, he is going to give her away so that he leaves this world with zero possessions, absolutely nothing. And finally, pride, the people at the foot of the cross are going to tempt him with the same thing the devil said to him: "if you're the son of God then come down from the cross. Prove it to us." Instead he is going to take the road of humility and he's going to crucify pride, so to speak, by being humiliated on the cross in the crucifixion. So the first Sunday of Lent is

already preparing us. The shadow of Calvary is already cast over this first Sunday as we begin our journey to Calvary, and then through Calvary to the resurrection.