



by Mary M. McGlone

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

March 5, 2017

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Our Lent starts with stories that take us from the garden to the desert — symbolically as well as geographically. We begin with Adam and Eve in God’s good garden. They, like their descendants after them, brought chaos to this garden. The story tells us that Adam and Eve had everything they needed, including a remarkable relationship with God who liked to stroll around the grounds with them.

Suddenly a wily creature suggests that God hasn’t been perfectly straight with the first couple. Painting God as a petty tyrant, the snake asks why people are not allowed to eat from fruit trees. Eve corrected him saying that there was but one forbidden tree. “And why would that be?” asks the serpent. “Don’t you get it? That’s where God’s power is hidden! Eat from that tree and you’ll be just like God — beholden to no one!” So Eve takes a closer look. She decides it’s time to think for herself.

Eve now enters into the first process of discernment. The tree is good for food, so it’s life-giving. The tree is nice to look at — she’s proud to realize that artistic humans can appreciate it in ways the lower creatures can’t. Finally, it’s “desirable for gaining wisdom.” She may not have been sure what that meant, but it sounded good and even sophisticated. So she took it and gave some to her husband who didn’t leave a record of his opinion on the matter.

Adam and Eve got what they sought — but it wasn't what they were hoping for. Their eyes were opened, and they saw that they were naked. Now it wasn't as if they hadn't seen each other before, in fact, throughout their entire lives they had seen one another just exactly as they were: male and female, loving images of God their Creator. But something changed. Now they were standing together with something to hide — they had started trying to be what they were not, and from then on there would be secrets and disguises. Lack of underwear wasn't the problem; it was their naked ambition. What got exposed was their attempt to be something they weren't, and suddenly they had to cover that up.

We know that the Genesis myths have been preserved not for any pretense of describing historical or scientific events but because they portray timeless truths. Among other things, this story tells us that rebellion against God's plan has a long history. The human capacity for creativity and personal growth is susceptible to selfish distortions which bring rivalry with God and one another — and that leads to the lies, murder and mayhem that tragically scar human history. Whether or not we call it original sin, we know that as Vatican II teaches, humanity has drifted from our proper relationship to God as well as our whole relationship with self, others and all created things (*Gaudium et Spes*, "The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," #13).

Today's readings lead us from the garden to join Jesus in the desert. Once again the tempter shows up — this time there's no snakeskin costume. Now the devil pretends to be a psychologist and Scripture scholar. As psychologist he twice questions Jesus' sense of identity: "If you are the Son of God ..." But in each case the end of the sentence suggests a way to betray his vocation as Son of God, the first by consecrating his power to his own well-being by magically creating bread and the second by demanding that God prove fatherly love on the absurd, fundamentalist terms of stopping his fall from the temple. These feats would have gone far in manipulating public opinion on Jesus' behalf — even if only to win him fame as a powerful magician. In response Jesus quotes Scripture right back at the tempter, thereby refusing to be the devil's brand of messiah.

In a world where there is bread enough for everyone if only we would share, a world where OSHA regulations make it impossible to get near the edge of a parapet and emergency rooms must treat every foolhardy show of, the third temptation might be the most contemporary — the temptation to power. Now the devil tells the truth. Getting the power of the kingdoms of the world demands turning one's back on God

and the human vocation to love.

Pope Francis has described the devil's kingdoms as the places where "everything comes under the laws of competition ... where the powerful feed upon the powerless" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel," #53). But Jesus offers an unequivocal "no" to idolatry of power and to the spiritual sloth that asks for miracles and refuses personal responsibility. He declines the devil's invitation to a life dedicated to self-service. Jesus' entire ministry is summed up in the yes to his vocation as Son implied in his rejection of the tempter's enticements.

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

The delightful myths of the first chapters of Genesis offer profound meditations on the meaning of human life and its travails. To start us off on our forty-day journey, the readings for the First Sunday of Lent deliberately feature the part of the creation story with "the Fall." The tragedy of this story's disobedience finds its reversal in the Gospel's depiction of Jesus, the obedient Son of God in the desert.

Before we analyze the story, it may be important to clarify that "myth" is a genre of literature which depicts a truth that goes deeper than mere facts. Myth uses story to illuminate timeless meaning. Thus, while it is highly unlikely that Adam and Eve and the serpent wandered around Eden talking to each other, the story's depiction of human vulnerability to temptation and deception, our tendency to rebel and wreak havoc in relationships, tells us profound truths about who we are.

As the story opens, we see life as it was intended to be. God had created the world with delightful and nourishing plants and had blown divine breath into human creatures so that they share the very life of God. All relationships moved in harmony: people with one another, human beings with creation and creatures with their life-giving God. Adam and Eve knew and could thoroughly enjoy where they fit in relation to everything.

Enter doubt in the guise of the questioning serpent. "Isn't God a bit arbitrary? Why aren't you allowed to eat the fruit of the trees?" Eve passes the first test admirably as she contradicts the deceitful exaggeration: "We can eat fruit ... it's only about the tree in the middle that God said you shall not eat it or even touch it." Imitating the serpent, Eve added that last phrase on her own. God hadn't said anything about not touching the tree. Was that what let the serpent know how gullible she was? If she

could believe that touching the tree would lead to death, perhaps she'd believe something even more fantastic! So the snake went on sowing distrust: "God is afraid of you, jealous that you might become just as powerful! Eat it and you'll see."

Eve took the bait and shared it with her mate. Forgetting that she and Adam were already created in the divine image, they took God for their rival instead of their source of life. They abandoned the dance of creature with Creator for a wrestling match they could never win. They exposed themselves as trying to be what they were not and were suddenly so ashamed that they had to hide. The myth of the Fall explores human rebellion against "creatureliness," the self-destructive drive for autonomy that infects history and wreaks havoc throughout God's creation.

ROMANS 5:12-19

If we ever wanted an example of Paul's sense of community and how the life of each individual affects the whole, his comparison of Adam and Christ more than fills the bill. Paul uses Adam as a symbol of everything thought of as the human condition and Christ as the alternative. It may be tempting to take this passage as a tract on original sin or the origin of death, but that would be to miss Paul's key point. Paul is talking about the power of the grace unleashed by Christ.

When Paul speaks of Adam's sin he's explaining that since our beginning, humanity has known alienation from God, a condition which ultimately entails alienation from our true selves and thus death in the sense of a dead-end existence. That's a life which can go nowhere because it is separated from God. Again, that is not Paul's principal focus. Paul calls us to look at our situation of estrangement from God and one another because he wants us to see that there is an option. Almost as if he were addressing citizens of the most contaminated cities in the world and trying to describe the alternative of breathing fresh air, Paul is saying, "You live in a situation of death, but there's another possibility!"

Paul's whole point here is to focus on Christ, but in order to get his message across he has to describe in detail the situation of sin his people consider as normal and inevitable and tell them it doesn't have to be this way. Paul tells people who simply accept corruption in the political, interpersonal and physical realm to see all of that as a distortion that has been overcome in Christ. In the process, Paul explains that each person's actions have cosmic consequences. Yes, Adam's disobedience unleashed disorder in the universe. On the other hand, Christ's obedience opened

the way to fidelity to God's plan for all creation.

If Paul had been preaching at a political rally he probably would have talked about all the problems and then presented the life of Christ asking, "Can we follow this? Can we accept this grace?" The chant he would have waited for is a resounding and ongoing "Yes! We can! Yes! We can!"

The Genesis story of the Fall ended by saying that Adam and Eve's eyes were opened and they came to know shame and the need to hide from one another and from God. Paul is asking us to open our eyes to something else. Paul wants us to see the possibility that Christ offers, the restoration of our relationship with God and the ability to live in the righteousness of loving rapport with God, neighbor and all of creation.

MATTHEW 4:1-11

The account of Jesus' temptations in the desert can be interpreted from multiple vantage points, all of which converge on his faithfulness as Son of God. In the light of Matthew's penchant for including the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures in his Gospel, we can read Jesus' testing as the redemption of Israel's desert unfaithfulness to her vocation as people of God. Or, recognizing that the only times Matthew depicts Jesus undergoing temptations like this are in these 40 days and in the garden of Gethsemane, we can understand that these temptations framed his entire ministry.

Using the temptations in the desert as his point of departure, the Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky offered a stinging critique of Christianity in his poem "The Grand Inquisitor." In this classic, a representative of the Spanish Inquisition encounters Christ who has returned to earth and tells him why he was wrong to reject the devil's offers in the desert. The inquisitor cynically explains that people will always follow the one who gives them bread, that Jesus could have cemented his popularity with the people by having angels rescue him from jumping off the temple and that if he had really loved humanity, he would have forced them to be good rather than allow them to wallow in mediocrity and fear of freedom, eventually risking eternal damnation.

Dostoyevsky understood that the question underneath the story of the temptations was how to be a faithful son or daughter of God, a question that was as real for Jesus

as for each of his followers. Dostoyevsky knew the strength of the temptations to choose security over all else, to beg for miracles over faith or responsibility, and to use coercive power to structure a society supposedly good for everyone. He might have gained that last insight from Napoleon who reversed the French Revolution's abolition of the church because he believed that religion with its promise of recompense in eternity was the way to keep peace in a society in which some enjoyed wealth while others starved.

All these interpretations recognize that Jesus' temptation in the desert was the temptation to pervert his vocation, to avoid being the one "who emptied himself" and "humbled himself becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

The key concept tying these three readings together is obedience. In this context, obedience is the attitude that initiates right relationships between God and human beings, or we might say obedience is the only way for human beings to relate to God as Father. The story of the Fall in Genesis explains the seeming inevitability of disobedience and the disorder that rebellion creates. When human beings enter into rivalry with God, rivalry and every manner of discord characterize the entire human milieu. Once that has happened, everyone is born into the chaos of a sinful world.

The story of Jesus in the desert presents the alternative. Only because Jesus chose the word of God over bread could he later ask his disciples to go out on mission unarmed and unprovisioned. When Jesus refused to jump off the parapet of the temple he refused to use miracles to prove God's love for him and to prove himself to the public. By doing that he demonstrated the faith he asked his disciples to share with him. Finally, in refusing to worship the tempter and the military, economic and political control he offered, Jesus affirmed that love is the only power that can build a future. As Paul tells us, one man's obedience opened the way of life to all.

Planning: 1st Sunday of Lent

By: Lawrence Mick

Almost everybody, even non-Christians, knows that Lent is about sin. It is a time of repentance and a time for conversion from sin to a more authentic Christian life.

Our readings for the First Sunday of Lent support this view. The story of Adam and Eve reminds us that sin has been part of human existence from the beginning. The second reading starts by recalling Adam's sin and says that all people have sinned. The Gospel recounts the temptations of the devil that Jesus faced in the wilderness, though he did not sin.

What is often overlooked, however, is the point that Paul is making in that second reading. Though all have sinned, he says, "how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one person Jesus Christ overflow for the many" (Romans 5:15). Grace abounds even more than sin abounds. God's grace, mercy and love overcomes the power of sin and enables us to live in freedom as the children of God.

Do you know this? Do you know it deep in your heart? Do your parishioners know this? Do they recognize that this is the basis of all we do in Lent and in every other season of the year? Lent is not supposed to be a time to feel terrible about ourselves and to fear God's wrath. It is a time to open our hearts more fully to the abundant grace of God that sets us free from sin and sadness.

This is not to deny the reality of sin. Sin is real and it marks all of our lives. We need to repent and to change our lives. We need to celebrate reconciliation and start again to live the Gospel fully. We need to recommit ourselves to living according to our baptismal promises. But God's grace is even more important, and we need to rely on it as we try to do everything else in Lent.

As you choose music, prepare prayer texts and write homilies, keep this central truth in mind. Throughout this season, find ways to remind the assembly of God's grace and the joy it offers.

Rite of Sending: If you have catechumens prepared for baptism, this is the typical day they will celebrate the Rite of Election with the bishop. In preparation for the diocesan celebration with the bishop, the Rite of Sending can be used in the local parish in coordination with the catechetical team.

Prayers: 1st Sunday of Lent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

The battle between good and evil is writ large in literature, drama and religion. Today's readings — indeed, all of Scripture — reveal a truth we know all too well. Even the best of us has experienced the powerful attraction of what we should not do. Our tradition tells us even more profoundly that the story is larger than temptation or failure. We hear, instead, what is possible: Grace, justification, obedience, righteousness and life are the real end of the story.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you were tempted in the desert: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you rejected your tempter: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you show us that temptation can be overcome: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider: Let us pray, my friends, for ourselves and for all who are confronted by temptation.

Minister: For the whole church and for all believers who are tempted by evil...as a penitent people, we pray,

- For peace in a world tempted to enmity with one another...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who struggle in a culture that glamorizes temptation...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For the courage to acknowledge our own temptations...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For the ability to see temptation as a path to grace and goodness...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For all who are tempted to despair because of poverty, injustice, violence or any kind of need...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those preparing for the sacraments of initiation...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For all in this community who seek physical healing and spiritual wholeness; and for those who have died...(names)...as a penitent people, we pray,

Presider: Ever-faithful God, we ask for the grace to remember that your compassionate presence is always in our midst. Help us to be aware that you accompany us, even in the face of temptation and evil. Infuse us with the same strength and courage you gave Jesus when he was tempted. We ask this in your holy

name. Amen.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Cycle A Sunday Resources** feature series. [View the full series.](#)