

First Sunday of Lent

February 26th, 2023

Reading 1 – Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

The LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.

Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made various trees grow that were delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the LORD God had made.

The serpent asked the woman, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?"

The woman answered the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.'"

But the serpent said to the woman:

"You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil."

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom.

So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Gensis 2: 7-9, 3:1-7 – Entering into this year's season of Lent. We open of this season's Sunday with a reading from a book in the bible that brings mixed feelings depending on who is listening in. For some who take a literal interpretation, these

stories can provide certainty. Certainty that when trying to understand how and why the universe came into being, Genesis provides a source that can explain those questions. For some who find the stories fascinating, divinely inspired, and part of the faith, this can bring a bit of confusion because when looking at the stories (especially the one we have today), the question usually ends up at “what, if anything is actual fact and how much of the stories should we take seriously”.

To that end, we all must remember that when these stories began their re-telling among our Jewish brother and sisters. Genesis “in the beginning” was a creative re-imagining of stories from the cultures around them to explain, from their perspective, how God created the world, made a relationship with them (Israel) and the nations around them. This was a custom because to them, they enjoyed to hear stories of old with a fresh new take on them. A take which explained their understanding of how life began, which was a very important practice in the ancient world (we see in most cultures an origin story of how life came to be). It was also important because it allowed them to divest energy in also explaining their understanding of questions like whether God can be trusted, why God elected us, what God requires of us now, how to live happy lives in the face of limits and difficulties, and how God works in the world.

So to them, and for us who will continue to read these stories (especially in the section we are reading from [primordial history, chapters 1-11]), we must remember that these stories do hold truth in them. Not in the historical sense of occurring (factuality), but in what the underlying message is trying to convey. Therefore, when hearing these events of Genesis, one must try to appreciate the literary conventions and assumptions of the scribes who wrote them.

Comments/questions: Keeping all that in mind, when looking at this excerpt of the “fall” event, one message that underlies this story is trust, and how humanity severed their total trust in God’s creative design and plan for the universe (a design and plan that continues today to form the Kingdom of God). Since this distrust to help co-create with God on this journey seems to be something we wrestle with consistently. In what ways do you continue to help remind yourself to trust God among many things that could leave a person to doubt? What could the Church (universal) do better to promote trusting in God and the churches who promote the LORD’s abounding love? – P.M.

Sources: Paulist Biblical Commentary – pages 18-19

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17

R. (cf. 3a) Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.
Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt
and of my sin cleanse me.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

For I acknowledge my offense,

and my sin is before me always:

"Against you only have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight."

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Reading 2 – Romans 5:12-19

Brothers and sisters:

Through one man sin entered the world,
and through sin, death,
and thus death came to all men, inasmuch as all sinned—
for up to the time of the law, sin was in the world,
though sin is not accounted when there is no law.

But death reigned from Adam to Moses,
even over those who did not sin
after the pattern of the trespass of Adam,
who is the type of the one who was to come.

But the gift is not like the transgression.

For if by the transgression of the one, the many died,
how much more did the grace of God
and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ
overflow for the many.

And the gift is not like the result of the one who sinned.

For after one sin there was the judgment that brought condemnation;
but the gift, after many transgressions, brought acquittal.

For if, by the transgression of the one,
death came to reign through that one,
how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace
and of the gift of justification

come to reign in life through the one Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, just as through one transgression
condemnation came upon all,
so, through one righteous act,
acquittal and life came to all.

For just as through the disobedience of the one man
the many were made sinners,

so, through the obedience of the one,
the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:12-19 – Romans is one of the few undisputed letters of Paul. Paul wrote this letter in 56 or 57 CE in the city of Corinth. Currently in Paul's missionary journey to proclaim the Gospel he has been setting up churches in the east (Galatia and Corinth). His thoughts now turn west with the end goal being Spain. On the way to Spain Paul will stop in Jerusalem to use the money (for personal and for the poor) that he's collected from the different churches to fund his ministry. Then on the way to Spain he will stop in Rome to ask for their help financially to get to Spain. In return for their financial support Paul will provide them with the Gospel message that he has been formulating from all his other missionary ventures.

The main audience that Paul is writing to is the Gentiles. Jewish believers in Jesus were growing the church by preaching in the synagogue to both other Jews and Gentiles. These Jewish believers drew conflict with the Roman authorities who exiled them for a period of time. After the death of Claudius in 54 CE the Jewish believers starting making their way back to Rome. So, the Roman church was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles.

The book of Romans contains many important theological themes such as God's righteousness, salvation, justification, and the Holy Spirit to name a few. These themes don't necessarily mean that Paul was responding to critical issues the community was facing. Rather the style of the letter as part essay and part letter allows Paul to describe his theology in detail and respond to certain objections that may arise in the community.

In our reading today we encounter the themes of righteousness, justification, and salvation. Paul compares Jesus as the New Adam. Adam's decision in the Garden of Eden was disastrous as it brought sin and death, which everyone that lived on earth after him inherited. Death even affects those who lived between Adam and Moses when Moses received the law. Now Jesus reverses all those disastrous consequences. Jesus' grace abounds for all those who have died while sin is in the world. Jesus also bring "acquittal" for the transgression of Adam experienced by all. Finally, Jesus brings righteousness in the face of disobedience.

Comments/Questions: As I view this passage I can see two different ways of interpreting Jesus as the New Adam. On one level Jesus' death on the cross had a salvific effect reversing the decision of Adam. We achieve salvation from original sin from Jesus' death on the cross. On another level Adam's sin can be viewed from a relational standpoint. The significance of Adam's sin is that it gives us an example of what sin does. Sin distorts our image of relationship with other people. Adam's sin was one of selfishness, seeking power and status. Jesus in a whole different way displays what it means to be human in relationship with other people. His whole life was serving others. This example exposes the flaws of sin and shows us the path to righteousness. Jesus' example reverses Adam's sin by giving us a new vision of how to live.

In your opinion which version do you relate to better? Did you look at the passage differently? – B.J.

Sources: Paulist Biblical Commentary – pages 1254 – 1255

Gospel – Matthew 4:1-11

At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry.

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 on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God."

Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.

For it is written:

He will command his angels concerning you and with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone."

Jesus answered him,

"Again it is written,

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

Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me."

At this, Jesus said to him,

"Get away, Satan!

It is written:

The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve."

Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Matthew 4:1-11. Following his baptism by John, Jesus, God's son, is taken up by the Spirit into an apocalyptic vision. Here a "cosmic struggle" between good and evil ensues. This is a fictional account of Jesus' testing in which he is shown as the "new Israel"—tempted to place his will before that of God's as his people did in the

desert. Whereas Israel grumbled and failed in the desert by not trusting in God, Jesus remains faithful. At the core of this test of faith is the inclination to live for oneself and not God.

The first test. John Meier in his commentary on the gospel of Matthew suggests that this could represent the temptation for Jesus to use his sonship to play a political and social Messiah to provide bread to feed the physical hunger of people rather than staying focused on the nourishment he receives on God's word, which sustains humanity in all its needs. As a good Jew, he quotes the word of God from the Jewish Bible to resist the temptation: "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (Deut 8:3) In other words, it is surrender to God's word, which creates and sustains humanity in all its needs.

In the second test, the devil shows that he too can quote scripture for his purpose. He takes Jesus to a high place of the Temple, and says in effect, "OK. As son, you place a high value on trust in God. Do you trust God enough to throw yourself down from here? After all, it is written 'He will give his angels charge of you,'... 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" Whereas the old Israel failed when tested, Jesus replies, "Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the lord your God.'" (Deut 6:16)

In the third test, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and promises, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." With firm resolve, Jesus says, "Begone, Satan!"

Jesus is tempted at other places in the gospels, i.e., Mark 8:27-33. When he acknowledges to Peter that he is the Messiah and that he will suffer and die, he has to quickly reprimand him for suggesting that they won't allow such a thing to happen to him. Jesus knows hostility is mounting against him as he continues to preach the truth about God that attracts people—but also infuriates others. To accept Peter's understanding of Messiah would mean that Jesus would not remain faithful to his mission to preach a new order for humanity.

Comments/Questions: The message for us in this passage is that being a son or daughter of God is not always about a matter of working wonders but of understanding God's will in Scripture and carrying it out in trust and obedience. How are we tempted to place ourselves ahead of God's will? Where do our temptations come from? Might there be times when we might mistakenly think we are following God's will and be wrong? – C.H.S.

Sources: Jesus of Nazareth, Who He Was and What He wanted, Gerhard Lohfink, Pp 223-226; Matthew, New Testament Message 3, John Meier Pp 28-31.