

Comments**First Sunday in Lent****Year A**

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.
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Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7

NRSV

Our reading is excerpts from an epic tale about the creation of humanity, beginning from after the creation of "the heavens and the earth" (2:4), a time when the earth was semi-arid. Ancient peoples thought that there were waters under the earth. Seepage of this water was insufficient for cultivation; as yet there was no rain and "no one to till the ground" (2:5). At that time, God formed *human* (Hebrew: *adam*) "from the dust of the ground" (2:7) and gave him his spirit of life. God put *human* (as yet androgynous) in Eden (2:8), his earthly domain, to cultivate and care for it. God tells him he may eat the fruit of the trees there, except for two: (1) that of "the knowledge of good and evil" (2:17), of complete knowledge and understanding (or of moral choice); and (2) that of "life" (2:9, 3:3), of eternal life, of becoming divine. If he does, he will "die", i.e. be separated from God. God provides *human* with an equal "partner" (2:18) of *human's* flesh. Thus the tale explains sex, of "Man" (2:23, Hebrew: *ish*) and "Woman" (*isha*).

At this point, the couple do not see shame in nudity, for their relationship to God is guiltless. Now the snake, a mischievous creature, (also a character in other ancient epics) appears. He sows doubt in the woman's mind about what God has commanded, and she responds inaccurately (3:2): she adds "nor shall you touch it" (3:3). The snake suggests that God is trying to fool her: rather than *dying*, she will attain mastery of knowledge, and become divine ("like God", 3:5). She finds this irresistible; she eats of its fruit and gives some to the man. Nudity is now embarrassing, for the couple has lost its innocent trusting relationship with God (3:8). In 3:8-19 God metes out punishment for disobeying his order: (1) to the snake: it will lack legs and eat dust; (2) to the woman: (a) despite the great pain of child-bearing, she will seek to bear more children; (b) (in an ancient society) man "shall rule over you"; (3) to the man: (a) cultivation will be labourious; (b) he will die, returning to "dust"; and (4) to all three: humans and snakes will be enemies. Thus are explained some basic facts of life. But sin has not changed God's intent: Eve is "mother of all living" (3:20) and God protects the couple by making "garments" (3:21) for them. To protect them from exceeding human limitations and becoming like gods, he expels them from Eden, into the ordinary world.

Psalm 32

NRSV

The psalmist tells us what he has learned in life: happiness is having one's sin forgiven and taken away ("covered") by God, and enjoying a clear conscience (v. 2). In vv. 3-5, he states his experiences: he was seriously ill ("your hand was heavy upon me") and was in pain ("groaning"), both signs of his alienation from God. (Illness was commonly regarded as punishment for sin.) He acknowledged his sin and did not continue his waywardness ("I did not hide ...", v. 5); he confessed to God, and God forgave him. Now v. 6: those who are faithful to God are not in

danger of dying when gravely ill ("distress", v. 6). (The "waters" are a symbol of death.) He is now protected by God (v. 7). Perhaps God speaks in vv. 8-9: he will lead the psalmist in his ways, through instruction and counsel. Don't be like "a horse or a mule" (v. 9) who must be coerced into action: use your initiative in being open to God. V. 11 is spoken to the congregation in the Temple: rejoice in the Lord!

Romans 5:12-19

NRSV

Paul has said that Christians, reconciled to God, will be saved, sharing in the risen life of Christ. Two notions are important here: (1) the punishment for Adam's sin was to die both physically and spiritually ("death came through sin"); and (2) we both sin ourselves and share in his sin ("spread to all"). Paul contrasts Adam and Christ, both inaugurate of eras. Adam foreshadowed Christ as head of humanity ("type", v. 14, precursor). Adam disobeyed God's direct command ("the transgression", v. 14, "the trespass", v. 15). The "free gift", i.e. Christ, is unlike Adam's sin: (1) "many died" before Christ's coming but even more so are "many" (indeed all) saved through Christ; (2) Adam was condemned to separation from God but Christ brings union with God (vv. 16, 18); (3) Adam's sin allowed "death" (v. 17) to rule through the Devil ("that one") but we let good rule our hearts ("dominion in life"); and (4) Adam's action led to the sin of many but Christ's will lead many to godliness (v. 19), to "eternal life" (v. 21). (Vv. 13-14b are an *aside*: before God gave Moses the Law, humans were not held accountable for their sins; even so they died.)

Matthew 4:1-11

NRSV

In Mark, only the essential historical facts are recorded: those in vv. 1, 2 and 11c. The disciples probably knew none of the details of Jesus' trials, for temptation is essentially a personal inner battle with one's conscience. "Forty days" (v. 2) reminds us of Moses and Elijah, both of whom also fasted for forty days as they prepared for their roles as God's agents to Israel – as does Jesus. All three of the temptations the Devil ("the tempter", v. 3, "Satan", v. 10) presents to Jesus are ways of sinning against the great commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, ... soul, and ... might". The "heart" was the seat of will, of moral choice; "soul" means *life*; "might" means possessions. (All Jesus' answers are from Deuteronomy 6-8.) To change "stones" (v. 3) into bread would be to use his power for his personal benefit. Jesus says that the "word" (v. 4) of God is the chief nourishment. The "holy city" (v. 5) is Jerusalem; a "pinnacle" probably overlooked the temple courts and the deep Kidron Valley. Jesus answers: testing God's protection by unnecessarily risking life is a mockery of real martyrdom – and of his sacrifice to come (v. 7). The Devil, evil forces personified, invites Jesus to prefer personal wealth and power over love of God (vv. 8-9). Jesus answers: God is the only god to be worshipped and served (v. 10). The details make the point that Jesus is the perfect lover of God, the ideal Israelite, the founder of a new way of being human.