

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

LECTIONARY #22

READING I Genesis 2:7–9; 3:1–7

A reading from the Book of Genesis

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!** >>

Genesis = JEN-uh-sis

Slight pause between "God" and "formed."
This is a very familiar reading of one of the foundational stories of the Abrahamic religions. Its tone is simultaneously austere, menacing, and playful.
Eden = EE-d*n

The serpent is the focal character in this narrative.

Slight pause between "serpent" and "said."
Slight pause between "certainly" and "will."

READING I Lent is a time of repentance and renewal, which makes today's first reading from the Book of Genesis particularly fitting. It comes from the second of two creation stories. This one gives particular attention to the creation of the first parents and the sin that causes them to be removed from the garden in Eden.

This highly symbolic story begins with God forming a man (Hebrew, *ha adam*) "out of the clay of the ground" (Hebrew, *ha adamah*), and then he "blew into his nostrils the breath of life." Of course, this is the

breath of God. Thus, the first human being is both of the earth and of God. Then God, as provider for his creatures, plants a garden with trees that are not just good for food but beautiful to look at and places the man (*adam*) in the garden to tend and care for it.

Two trees in the middle of the garden represent attributes that do not belong to humans—only to God—and from which humans must be protected for their welfare. One is the tree of life, which probably represents immortality. The other is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In

Hebrew, "to know" is experiential. The phrase "good and evil" is an example of a literary technique called a merism, in which two contrasting elements represent those and everything in between. Thus, eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil signifies the experience of everything on the spectrum of good and evil, which is dangerous and life-threatening for humans who do not have the wisdom and mastery that God has.

With this background in mind, we can better understand what the author of this creation account sought to convey about

The serpent's argument that God knows what eating the fruit will be like for Eve is what persuades her to eat. Don't overdo this, but keep in mind that the serpent's cunning is persuasiveness.

The conclusion demonstrates the grim underside of the knowledge the serpent promised: self-awareness.

For meditation and context:

Slight pause between "man" and "sin"; slight pause between "sin" and "entered." Put another way, when you proclaim "sin," give it a little pause before and after.

The reading consists of Paul's discourse on sin, death, and redemption. Its tone is earnest.

human sin and its consequences. Adam and Eve are living in the garden in perfect harmony with God and God's creation. Then, into the garden appears a serpent. Many of us assume that this serpent is Satan or the devil, but, in fact, the narrator describes it as the most cunning of God's creatures. The serpent poses a question to the woman concerning what God told Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and she responds with an imperfect facsimile of what God said. Finally, when the serpent assures her that they—Adam was with her—would not die if they ate

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.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 51:3–4, 5–6, 12–13, 17 (3a)

R. 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.	A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.	Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me.
For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always:	Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me.
"Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."	O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

READING II Romans 5:12–19

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

[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.

from the tree in the middle of the garden, but they would "be like gods who know what is good and what is evil," she ate of the tree and so did her partner. Like the word "knowing," eating is also a verb of experiencing. Why did they do it? The woman concluded, "the tree . . . was desirable for gaining wisdom." In other words, they wanted to be like God, despite God's warning that it would bring death to them. Immediately, the humans began to experience the consequences of their action—alienation, shame, and blame. What about us? How do we try to play god

with our lives and the lives of others, and what consequences come of it?

READING II Today's second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans adds another interpretive layer to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and the introduction of sin into the world. Paul employs a literary feature called a type. Generally speaking, a type is a pattern or blueprint. When used as a tool for biblical interpretation, a type is a person or event from the Old Testament that is used as a

Though unstressed, "But" signals an intensification of the earnest tone of the reading.

Slight pause between "man" and "Jesus."

The second half of the reading really focuses on the word "gift."

Note the inversion and repetition Paul uses here: disobedience and one man leading to many sinners; the obedience of the one, and many made righteous.

TO KEEP IN MIND

Make eye contact with the assembly. This helps keep the assembly engaged with the reading.

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**.]

[Shorter: Romans 5:12, 17–19 (see brackets)]

blueprint for a more perfect person or event in the New Testament.

In this reading, Paul uses the first human, Adam, as a type of the second human, Jesus Christ, but this type is a bit out of the ordinary, because it describes an inverse relationship between the two. Through the first human, Adam, sin and death entered into the world and all were affected by it. Paul then contrasts Adam's pitiful situation and the consequences that it had *for the many* with the overflowing abundance of grace that the second human, Jesus Christ, brought into the world *for the*

many. He wants to make clear that the gift is not in proportion to the judgment and condemnation that one would expect from one man's sin, as if God's mercy covered over only this one sin.

And what is this gift? Paul describes it as justification, the process of being set right with God, or acquittal, as in a court of law. The defendant is sinful humanity from the time of Adam and Eve to the present. Through the sacrifice of atonement that Jesus effected in his crucifixion, God, the judge, declares that humanity is acquitted and the case against it is dismissed, so that

humanity is restored to right relationship with God. This is Paul's teaching on justification by faith. But acquittal is not the same thing as innocence. Humanity did nothing to earn this gift of right relationship with God. Rather, it is given as a free gift to anyone who trusts in the graciousness of God as expressed through Jesus' sacrificial love.

Paul's Jewish background shines through when he writes about how sin was in the world even before the law was given to Moses and the Israelites. His logic is that people cannot be held responsible for

This reading relates a dramatic story in the life of Christ. Its tone is magical. Slight pause between "time" and "Jesus."

A familiar statement. Proclaim as if it is being spoken for the first time.

parapet = PAYR-uh-puht

The exchange between Jesus and the devil has a rabbinical character, in which they argue by quoting Scripture to each other.

transgressing the law if it has not been given to them. Still, it is important to notice how Paul personifies sin as an evil force that is hostile to God and how he talks about death as not limited to physical death but as alienation from the relationship that God wishes for humanity.

GOSPEL Today's Gospel reading is the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness as told by the author of Matthew's Gospel. This story is also included in Luke and Mark.

GOSPEL Matthew 4:1-11

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

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."

Mark's version of the story is very brief, indicating only that Jesus was driven into the desert by the Spirit and spent forty days there, before beginning his public ministry. Mark's reference to forty days might evoke in your memory the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the desert during the Exodus. But Matthew's "forty days and forty nights" further suggests the time that Moses spent on Mount Sinai, when the covenant between God and the Israelites was ratified (Exodus 24:18) and the forty days and nights that when he fasted on Mount Sinai in the presence of God and wrote the

words of the covenant on two stone tablets (Exodus 34:27-35). Forty is a symbolic number, representing transition from one state to another. In this case, it is a transition from Jesus' private life to his public ministry.

Mark's version of the story says that Jesus was tempted by Satan and ministered to by angels (Mark 1:12-13). Matthew's version has these same basic elements, but can you also imagine a second generation of Jesus followers wondering what Jesus was doing out in the desert for such a long time? Perhaps that is why Matthew's version includes an extended dialogue or

"Get away, Satan": As much an expression of exasperation as it is a command.

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.

debate between Jesus and Satan, who is also identified as the tempter and the devil. Matthew tells us that Jesus was fasting during that time, and fasting has traditionally been understood to be a way of moving more deeply into prayer and preparing oneself for significant life transitions.

The enhancements that the author of Matthew's Gospel made to Mark's version of this story are significant because they flesh out what it meant when Jesus was declared Son of God at his baptism. In particular, pay attention to the three tests that are placed before Jesus: (1) "If you are the

Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread," (2) "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down" from the top of the Temple, and (3) "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." As a whole, these temptations are tests of Jesus' willingness, as Son of God, to rely on God alone for nourishment, protection, and safety. All three of Jesus' responses come from the Book of Deuteronomy, which consists mostly of a very long speech that Moses gives when recommitting the Israelites to the covenant that God made with them on Sinai, before

they cross over to the Promised Land. More precisely, they come from Deuteronomy 6—8, a section of text devoted to what the Israelites must do to faithfully live out the covenant in the Promised Land. Moreover, there is cause for rejoicing, because, unlike the dialogue between Eve and the serpent, Jesus wins this debate! C.C.