

First Sunday in Lent

Glen Bengson

RCL: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11 LM: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17; Romans 5:12-19 or 5:12, 17-19; Matthew 4:1-11

This Sunday takes us to a garden and the wilderness to face temptation. Who are we, and will we live our true identity or succumb to the lure of other voices and claims on our life? Who is our God, and will we be faithful and live in accord with our professions of loyalty to God?

The reading from Genesis identifies the roots of sin in humankind's desire to "be like God" and to gain control of life for ourselves. We see creation's goodness and forget God's word that creation is for all to enjoy. We can see the results of our possessiveness all around us—in environmental degradation, material greed, and economic and political injustice.

Humankind's first task is to till the soil and care for creation (v. 15). Food is a necessity for human life, yet temptation also comes from eating. Food can be the occasion for great celebration and human community or the occasion for greed and human alienation.

Sin breaks relationships, with God and with our neighbors. God wants healing and reconciliation in our lives for us to experience life in its intended joy and abundance. Psalm 32 (or Psalm 51 in the Roman Catholic Lectionary) helps us voice our confession and rest our hopes on God's grace for new life.

"Umntu, Ngamntu, Ngabantu." This African phrase means "A person is not a person without other people." Concerns about justice for poor and hungry people are, at root, concerns for interrelationships of people with one another, with the environment, and with God. The Church is a place to image the kind of just and peaceful human relationships God intends for all people to share as we live together as God's children.

In Matthew's temptation story, Jesus, after his baptism, is "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness to face trials. So our baptism, when we enter the community of Christ and are gifted by the Spirit, sends us out into the wilderness of the world to grapple with life's temptations, the forces of evil, and the tests of faith that daily come our way.

Jesse Jackson's preaching litany "I am somebody" affirms people created in God's image. Satan seeks to exploit that identity in tempting Jesus. "IF you are the Son of God" could also be translated "SINCE you are . . ." When Satan, or demons in other passages, or those gathered at the cross who hurl insults at Jesus (Matthew 27) use these words of recognition, they tempt Jesus to deny who he is and misuse his identity and power for his own needs. We confront the same temptation. Will we betray our identities as God's children with selfish actions that aim to control life for our own benefit?

Jesus' first temptation is to "command these stones to become bread," a curious echo of God's first task to humans in Genesis, namely, to create nourishment by tilling the soil. Jesus responds, "One does not live by bread alone." One of my favorite cartoons has a character standing in front of a huge ice cream sundae saying exactly those words. Even Scripture can be quoted ~~to~~ ^{to} fulfill our own desires rather than point us to living and acting for others so that all can have bread.

Remember that it is in a situation of extreme hunger, after forty days of fasting, that Jesus faces these tests. Would Jesus remain faithful to God's intentions and purpose? Each Christian faces the same challenge and opportunity daily.

In the Holy Land, the Mount of Temptation, where tradition says Jesus faced these trials, rises above the Palestinian town of Jericho. Our tour group stopped there for refreshment at the Temptation Restaurant, a rather large restaurant and souvenir shop. Ironies were apparent as we enjoyed plentiful food in a place associated with hunger, and were offered abundant wares to satisfy our materialistic impulses. Perhaps that's how the rest of the world sees our North American and European societies—overflowing with food and life's luxuries while others face hunger and even starvation daily. While we may fast voluntarily during Lent, many endure a daily fast they do not choose.

A further irony at the Mount of Temptation is the cable-car ride that whisks you to the summit, with views down on the kingdoms of the world. In Western societies it is very tempting to look down on others in our world, worshiping not God but the systems, people, and circumstances that give us such a privileged view. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him," Jesus says to Satan and to us.

Children's Time

Martin Luther explains the First Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that God has created me and all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul. . . . In addition, God daily and abundantly provides food and drink, house and home . . . along with all the necessities of life. . . . God does all this out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and obey him."¹

Invite the children forward and ask them what they're thankful for, what is most important to them. You'll get some of the above answers and others. These may be gifts of God for which we are thankful and that we seek to honor and use in the best way possible. Close with a prayer of thanks and commitment.

Musical Suggestions

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God—LBW 228, 229 Let Us Break Bread Together—LBW 212 O God of Earth and Altar—LBW 428 One Bread, One Body—WOV 710 Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ—WOV 754 (also BP 213) Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God—WOV 783 Creator God, Who Gives the Earth—BP 191

1. *Luther's Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994) 25.