

February 26, 2023  
1st Sunday of Lent  
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 by bread alone, but by 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.

### **Background:**

For the past several weeks the gospel readings have dealt with Jesus teaching the disciples what it means to be his followers. As we begin Lent, the Gospel text takes a dramatic shift. The first Sunday of Lent always presents an account of Jesus being directly tempted by the devil. The second Sunday of Lent is an account of the Transfiguration. This year the text will come from Matthew 17:1-9. The next three gospel texts will be taken from John's Gospel: John 4:5-42, the Samaritan woman at the well; John 9:1-41, curing of the man born blind; and John 11:1-45, raising Lazarus. The last Sunday of Lent is Passion Sunday, and the gospel will again come from Matthew 26:12-27:66. None of these gospels center on threats of punishment or turning from evil, but rather on the goodness of God overflowing and becoming manifest.

As Matthew presents the sequence of events of Jesus' temptation, it follows on Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:13-17). Matthew describes Jesus coming out of the water and "the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matt 3:16-17) Matthew then describes Jesus being led by the spirit into the desert to be tempted. The description of Jesus' temptation is the gospel text for this Sunday.

Matthew's community assumed the presence of evil in ways that most modern readers might dismiss as naive or even fanciful. They believed that there was an abundance of evil spirits whose main pastime was interacting with humans, sometimes with a surprising blessing but often with ill intentions. In order to ward off the ill effects of these spirits, people relied on objects and ritual actions and prayers that were believed to have protective powers. This spirit world also enjoyed its own way of communication and being connected, so that what happened in one part was known by others. The fact that God had said of Jesus that this was "my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased" would naturally draw a response from others in the spirit world. Other spirits would want to know if Jesus was indeed worthy of such praise, and tempt him in such ways that he might lose his favored status.

With their understanding, it is no surprise for the people for whom Matthew is writing that following the baptism, Jesus is tempted by the devil. What is surprising is that Jesus does not rely on any of the things that they would have used to protect themselves from the powers of the spirit world, even after he has fasted for forty days and is hungry and vulnerable on many levels.

Matthew is also making use of the community's familiarity with the events of the Exodus from Egypt. All the responses of Jesus to the temptations are quotations from the description of Israel's wandering in the desert, as

recorded in the book of Deuteronomy (8:3, 6:16 and 6:13). Jesus' temptation and the exodus both take place in the desert, the place normally associated with the evil spirits. They would also recognize that Israel spent forty years in the desert, and Jesus has been fasting in the desert for forty days and forty nights. Matthew is building a connection between the experience of their ancestors in faith and the experience of Jesus.

Matthew also rearranges Luke's account of the temptations so that the last temptation places Jesus on a very high mountain. Mountains were places of revelation, and the story of Moses' encounter with God on the mountain was familiar to everyone as they heard Matthew describe Jesus' last encounter. (Next week Matthew's gospel will again place Jesus on a high mountain with three of the disciples for the transfiguration. Matthew's community knew well the tradition that the mountain was the place where God revealed the relationship God desired to have with them as the chosen people.)

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. What are your thoughts and feelings about Lent this year?
2. Have you ever thought about what God hopes/desires for you during this Lenten season so that you will better celebrate the resurrection/Easter and eternal life God desires to share with you?
3. What is your experience of evil in your life and/or in the world around you?
4. What do you rely on to protect you from the power of evil?
5. How do you experience occasions of temptation at this stage of your life?
6. Jesus is tempted to use his status as beloved Son of God for his own purposes, (1) to ease his hunger, (2) to experience God's protection, and (3) to be treated as one above others. In his rejection of the temptations, he refuses to use his status as highly favored Son of God and instead demonstrates his choice to be one of us even in being tempted. What does that say to you?
7. What did Jesus learn about himself from his experience of being in the desert, the temptations, and how he responded?
8. As you reflect on this text, what sense of yourself and your relationship with God come to the fore within you? Can you take some time to talk with God about your own awareness of being tempted, or how you would like to use this season of Lent?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to [annemarie.lom@gmail.com](mailto:annemarie.lom@gmail.com)

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click there will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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## **Excerpts from the readings for February 26, 2023, the First Sunday of Lent**

The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground, and he planted a garden in Eden. He placed there the man, and in the middle of the garden the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now the serpent asked the woman, "Did God 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 that God said, 'You shall not eat it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said: "You will not die! God knows that when 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 took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, 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.

Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.  
Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in your compassion wipe out my offense.  
"Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."  
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.  
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.

Through one man sin entered the world, and death came to all. But the gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one, the many died, how much more did 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. If, by the transgression of the one, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the gift of justification come to reign through the one Jesus Christ. Through one sin, condemnation came upon all; through one righteous act, life came to all.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days, and afterwards he was hungry. The tempter approached and said, "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 from the mouth of God." Then the devil made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels to 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 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.

**Excerpts from Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Psalm 51:3-6, 12-13, 17; Romans 5:12-19; and Matthew 4:1-11**

**From Joe:**

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for February 26th, the First Sunday of Lent, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel from Matthew is the story where Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After a forty-day day fast, Jesus is tempted three times, and each time he resists. He responds instead to each temptation with quotes from scripture: "One does not live on bread alone," "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test," and "You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve."

The other readings also have references to temptations, and giving in to them, and acknowledging the sin, and ultimately, the one act of obedience to the Father through which Jesus saved each one of us. In the first reading, from Genesis, the serpent successfully tempts Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. "She saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she ate it; and she also gave some to her husband." Psalm 51 requests, "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned. A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me." The second reading is from the letter to the Romans, where Paul writes, "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."

The gospel that comes to us as we begin the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday follows directly on the series of gospels we have been hearing from the Sermon on the Mount for the past four weeks. The Ash Wednesday gospel also establishes the three Lenten practices, and what Jesus taught about each: "When you give alms,..." "When you pray,..." "When you fast,..." do these deeds "not that others may see them... and your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you." The gospels for the Sundays in Lent move away from the Sermon on the Mount, but the first one this Sunday still has a connection to it. It starts with a fast, like we do on the first day of Lent. Jesus sets the example for us, fasting for forty days.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!