

Sunday, March 1, 2020

1st Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

2nd Reading: Romans 5:12-19

Responsorial: Psalm 51:3-6, 12-13, 17

Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

Staying Faithful to Commitments/Prayer during this Lenten Season of Grace

If you are the Son of God . . . (Matthew 4:3, 6)

What father would send his son on a starvation mission in the wilderness? That's the cunning strategy the devil used: sow doubt about God's goodness and love into Jesus' mind. If he could shake Jesus' trust in his Father, then maybe Jesus would feel less obligated to stay faithful. The temptations pile up until the final gambit: God isn't helping you here; all he's left you with is hunger and humiliation. Is it worth all the pain? I can give you so much more, so why not bow down to me instead? Do we have a deal?

This is the same strategy the serpent used against Adam and Eve in today's first reading: "Did God really say . . . ?" (Genesis 3:1). God knows that if you eat that fruit, you'll be just like him. He's trying to keep you from becoming all that you can be because he doesn't want any rivals.

But where our first parents failed, Jesus succeeded. And in succeeding, he opened the way for us to succeed as well. He beat back the devil's temptations by doing the one thing that even we can do when we are tempted: he exercised stubborn faith. Yes, Jesus was hungry and exhausted. Yes, he desperately wanted relief. But he knew what God had asked of him, and he held fast to God's will and God's promises.

In the end, Jesus won out. Where once he heard only the devil's words of harassment, now he heard angels singing songs of comfort and praise.

Make no mistake, you will be tempted this Lent, if you haven't been already. The devil will try to convince you that God doesn't care about you or that obeying the commandments will leave you unsatisfied. Don't believe it! Hold fast to your Lenten commitments. Stay faithful in prayer. And if you should fall short, remember that you are still a child of God. He loves you and he will always help you. He may even send an angel to comfort you!

"Lord, strengthen me with your grace this Lent so that I can overcome any temptation."

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission.)

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. The first reading takes us back to the origin of sin: *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.”*
 - Why was the temptation to be *like gods* such a powerful temptation for Eve and Adam -- and is for us as well?
 - Why is giving into this temptation such a major sin?
 - What are some areas in your life where you believe you really know what’s best and, thus, struggle to entrust these areas to God’s providential care?
2. The responsorial psalm is David’s great prayer of repentance. It opens with these words: *“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. 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.* It continues with this request to God: *A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me.”*
 - In what ways does David’s opening cry represent what it means to make an “act of perfect contrition”?
 - Why do you think David’s request, that follows his opening prayer to God, was so important to him?
 - Where in your relationship with God and others could you use a *clean heart* and a *steadfast spirit*?
3. The second reading begins as follows: *Through one man sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all men, inasmuch as all sinned.* It continues with these words: *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.* It closes as follows: *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.*
 - What do you think St. Paul meant when he said, *death came to all men, inasmuch as all sinned*?
 - How would you describe what it means to *receive the abundance of grace and the gift of justification*?
 - What steps can you take this Lent to receive more fully these wonderful gifts from God, especially in experiencing God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?
 - Through the cross there was a “divine exchange.” How do the ending words describe this divine exchange?
4. In the Gospel, Jesus uses these Scriptures to defeat Satan’s temptations: *One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God* (DT 8:3); *He will command his angels concerning you and with their hands they will support you* (Ps 91:11-12); *lest you dash your foot against a stone; You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test* (DT 6:16); and *The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve* (DT 6:13).
 - Why were these Scripture such powerful weapons against Satan’s lies and the temptations to Jesus—and to us?
 - During Lent, what commitment are you willing to make to increase your times of prayer and Scripture reading?
 - Are you willing to be accountable to someone for this commitment? If not, why not?
5. The meditation closes with these words of encouragement: “Make no mistake, you will be tempted this Lent, if you haven’t been already. The devil will try to convince you that God doesn’t care about you or that obeying the commandments will leave you unsatisfied. Don’t believe it! Hold fast to your Lenten commitments. Stay faithful in prayer. And if you should fall short, remember that you are still a child of God. He loves you and he will always help you. He may even send an angel to comfort you!”
 - The closing words are a warning to us of some of the temptations that can occur during Lent. Other temptations that can oppress us include a tendency toward irritation, resentment, selfishness, or jealousy? Are you willing to choose one of these temptations, and commit to making headway in that area this Lent? If not, why not?
 - During the upcoming weeks of Lent, what steps can you take to “Hold fast to your Lenten commitments” and “Stay faithful in prayer” – for example, to turn to the Lord during times of temptation in order to ask for the power of his “Word”, the power of his Cross, and the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome them?

Take some time to pray and ask the Lord to not only show you what tempts you the most during the day, but also for the grace and the strength to say no to the temptations during this Lenten season of grace. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as the starting point.

“Lord, strengthen me with your grace this Lent so that I can overcome any temptation.”

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]