

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the First Sunday of Lent (Year A):
Considering Two Temptation Stories

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Reflections on
Genesis 2:7 – 3:1-7; Romans 5: 12-19; Mt 4: 1-11

I was looking forward to having children with us today, as they begin their journey through Lent to their baptism at Easter, because children help us to hear today's readings with fresh ears. They help us remember that the two temptation stories in today's readings are just that – stories – meant to give us food for thought.

Over the centuries we grown-ups have tried to pin these accounts down to definitive dogmatic interpretations, tying ourselves up in theological knots in the process and giving us tunnel vision about their meaning. But they are given to us as discussion starters, not discussion enders. (I am not going to deal with the second reading, from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, because his long and complicated argument is better suited to an hour-long class than a ten-minute homily!)

These two temptation stories – the eating of the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden and Jesus's encounter with the Devil in the desert – deal with the dilemmas of our human condition. Here, for what it's worth, are my reflections on these stories, but you should feel free to accept them or not, or to take them and develop them further in your own way.

First, the Creation story from the Book of Genesis tells us that we are of the earth; we belong to it. Today's modern translation says that *God fashioned an earth creature out of the clay of the earth*. This sounds quite different from the more traditional one: *God made man out of the clay of the ground*. But we know that the Hebrew original says that God made *adam* (that is, a human being) out of *adamah* (earth), so the modern version catches more of the Hebrew wordplay. I think this idea that we

belong to the earth has a lot to offer our generation; it feeds into our growing awareness of the environment and our dependence upon it.

Second, the Genesis story tells us that our world is not closed and unchanging. The earth is dynamic and open to new possibilities, and we participate in its development. Our choices affect what happens, for good or ill. Consequences can be foreseen or unintended (what happens when we mine, or drill, or frack the earth?). Our motivations can be well-meaning, or selfish, or downright malicious. Whatever our choices, we must bear the consequences.

Third, this makes us vulnerable. The book of Genesis has a striking image for this fact: *their eyes were opened, and they realized that they were naked*. We feel exposed. We have lost our innocence and are embarrassed by our mistakes and failures. As the story continues beyond today's reading, the human couple tries to hide or take refuge in denial – a tendency we all know well! And if we cannot hide, we try to lay the blame elsewhere: *the woman made me do it*, says Adam (what a long, entrenched history that one has!); *the serpent (the Devil) made me do it*, says Eve (the ultimate cheap excuse).

But the story in Genesis does not stop there. It goes on to show that God continues to accompany us in our evolving history. For example, God responds to the embarrassment of the first couple by providing them with garments made of skins. For some reason, the image of Adam and Eve covering their nakedness with fig leaves has caught our imagination far better than the image of God handing them more substantial clothes and saying, in effect, "Those fig leaves aren't going to last very long, so let me offer you something better!"

Our second temptation story seems very different at first. To begin with, it is set in the desert, not in a garden. But it addresses the same issues: our human condition; the challenges life brings us; and the mistakes we are likely to make along the way. The story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness helps us to look at an alternative path, the example of Jesus. It also offers us a preview of his ministry.

The most important thing I see in this story is that Jesus fully embraces being human, belonging to the earth. The Devil starts his attack with the sly hint: *if you are the son of God . . . "do something that only God can do."* But Jesus will have none of it.

In the first temptation, Jesus accepts being hungry. He does not short-circuit the human experience of hunger by turning stones into bread: *[humankind] does not live by bread alone, he says, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.* Later on in his ministry, Jesus will indeed provide bread to the hungry crowds. He will do this not by a show of power (turning stones into bread), but by the ordinary act of sharing the loaves and fishes that are on hand. Somehow they will prove more than sufficient to feed everyone.

In the second temptation, Jesus accepts human vulnerability, and he takes responsibility for his actions. He does not expect a miraculous rescue from the consequences of his choices, e.g. throwing himself off the parapet of the temple and expecting to be caught. In the past few weeks, we had a contemporary example of this kind of foolhardiness, when a pastor in Georgia got bitten by a rattlesnake he was handling as a show of faith; he refused medical treatment and died as a result. One wishes he had taken to heart Jesus's reply to the Tempter:

Do not put God to the test!

In Gethsemane Jesus will face the ultimate consequences of the way he has lived his life. Anticipating a violent response to his insistence on speaking truth to power, he will ask God, *if it be your will, let this cup pass from me*, but he accepts that there may be no miraculous rescue: *Not my will, but yours be done.* He will pass through death, like every human being.

The third temptation is the invitation to go over to the dark side: to choose the way of domination over all the kingdoms of the earth. The Devil's offer of kingship in exchange for worship makes Jesus truly angry: *Away with you, Satan . . . God alone will you worship.* Jesus would spend his life preaching the reign of God, not his own. Although we sometimes speak of Christ as king or ruler, we should always remember that there is something hugely paradoxical about this idea: our "king" is the one who emptied himself and lived the life of a servant.

The Spirit has led us here to our forty days in the desert. This is a time for us to clear out the clutter that distracts us from the example of Jesus. This is a time to accept our human condition: to let ourselves experience our human hungers, whatever they may be, and to help satisfy the hungers of those who share this earth with us. This is a time to acknowledge our vulnerabilities: to accept responsibility for our life choices and have compassion for the vulnerabilities of others (a time for forgiveness); to carry our own crosses and help others bear theirs. This is a time to renounce domination and control over others, and seek how best to serve one another, and the whole earth to which we belong.

Let us embark on this together!