

## First Sunday of Lent, Cycle A

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

My students and I are studying the Vatican II document about the Church in the modern world. *Gaudium et spes* describes amazing human advances; many things we once looked to God for, we now supply ourselves. It cautions that the world needs the Church, despite its sinfulness, to help sort out what to do morally with the new knowledge. For “when God is forgotten, the creature itself grows unintelligible” (36).

So, we discuss if it is right to euthanize a person with dementia. Unsurprisingly, *Gaudium et spes* calls euthanasia infamous. My students generally agree, because they wish to respect the dignity of the person. Then I ask if they should be able to end their own lives to avoid suffering. The majority say yes, both because they want control over their lives and because they do not want to cause their loved ones to suffer.

This example underscores *Gaudium et spes'* point. How do an increasing number of Westerners decide that killing another is wrong, but killing myself is okay? On this first Sunday of Lent, we are invited to look at how we slip into sin. (Please note that the story is a myth, which uses symbols to explain something that is true for all people in all times. The activities and relationships describe the reality we live today. The woman and the man are every woman and every man.) We are told that God makes the human – *adam* means a human being – and gives the human life by sharing God’s own breath. This indicates that God has powers far beyond us and that God wants only intimacy and good for us. In contrast, humans have a limitation, knowing about good and evil. True, we do get muddled by moral issues. The dialogue between the serpent and the woman shows how we talk ourselves into sin. First, the serpent suggests God places unfair limits on us. Then the woman begins to trash talk, making the limitation more than it is: we cannot eat the fruit or *even touch it*, she exaggerates. The serpent next portrays God as competitive and oppressive and holds out for the woman the ultimate hook, “you will be like gods.” That does it. We all want to be gods who know, control and command everything. The sin results in further distortions of the human ability to handle morality: they are ashamed of their bodies and hide their creativity from God.

We live this pattern out daily. God’s breath animates us. God has given us a world of opportunity and blessings. God is available to us at all times. Yet we are tempted to exaggerate our limitations and chafe at them. Why aren’t we more successful? Why can’t we be young forever? Why doesn’t our life go exactly the way we want? Then we grow angry at God for oppressing and competing with us: we wonder why God inflicts suffering on us. We cause so much harm and then blame God or we portray God as playing sick games of testing us before granting what we want. Finally, we use technology, science and economics without a moral compass: because we can build a nuclear bomb, become billionaires and cut short the lives of the dying, we do. We cut ourselves off from God in many ways, claiming a level of control no human being really has.

Jesus models a different pattern for us. *Forty days and forty nights* is a phrase from the story of Noah and his family, floating through the flood, as the world is recreated. We are witnessing in Jesus a new creation, a new pattern. When the tempter first challenges him to turn the stones into bread, he is asking, “Who provides for your basic needs?” If we believe we must be self-sufficient – and too many of us do – the answer is, “ME!” Jesus, capable as he was to provide his own food, nevertheless acknowledges that God is the ultimate source of life. When the tempter challenges Jesus to throw himself off the Temple so God can save him, the tempter wants Jesus to push God to prove that God does not cause our suffering, even when we foolishly cause it ourselves. Jesus indicates that such an idea is patently false. The third temptation is about how much Jesus is willing to compromise to gain power, the ultimate hook. Instead of biting, Jesus recites the proper order of God and humans: God is God and we are just creatures. Jesus sidesteps all the traps of our standard pattern of sin.

If we dismiss this because Jesus was divine or if we just admire him for it, the entire Bible invites us to be encouraged instead. In Jesus, God says, “I am working with you on this. I am one with you, so intimately that you cannot tell where you end and I begin. Let me help you overcome sin. Remember me and I will make you intelligible again.”

- ❖ What part of the pattern of sin do you most clearly recognize in your behaviors?
- ❖ How can we provide for our needs and still recognize that God is the ultimate source of our lives?