

**This Sunday's Readings – The First Sunday of Lent** – The theme of today's readings is temptation and sin.

It seems appropriate that today's first reading is from the Book of Genesis, which recounts the creation of man. The author of Genesis was traditionally thought to be Moses. However, Genesis, as well as the other first 4 books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), was written sometime during the reign of King David, a few hundred years after Moses. It appears that many authors from various traditions contributed to this book. Genesis is a book of stories. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 syndicated column further explains this – "One of the most important finds in the historico-critical study of the Bible was the discovery that almost all its authors used sources. When they sat down to write their part of Scripture, they worked with more than just a blank sheet of papyrus and their divinely inspired imaginations. Other papyri were on their writing tables, papyri containing the writings of earlier authors -- quotes, narratives and stories -- which they eventually integrated into their own works. Nowhere are sources more evident than in Genesis. At the very beginning of the book, we come across two different -- often contradictory -- stories of creation. The first (1:1-2:4) was written shortly after the end of the Babylonian Exile at the end of the sixth century B.C.E.; the second (the rest of chapter 2 and all of chapter 3) was composed 400 years earlier, not long after the death of King David, during his son Solomon's reign. Only in the fifth century B.C.E. did a "redactor" combine these two narrative sources into the biblical format we know today". Today's first reading is taken from Chapter 2 and is the second story of creation. The first story of creation (Chapter 1) was written during the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and is from the Priestly (P) tradition. This second story of creation was written during the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC and is from the Yahwist (J) tradition. In the first part of the story, God, like a potter, creates man out of clay and gives him life. It is interesting to note here that the Hebrew word for "man" is *adam*. God then creates a garden in Eden and placed the man in the garden. In Sumerian, the word eden means "fertile plain" and was a region in Southern Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq). We now jump to Chapter 3. Adam and Eve could eat the fruit of any of the trees except for the tree of good and evil. That was forbidden by God. Satan, in the form of a serpent, tempts Eve by saying that if she eats of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, she and Adam "will be like gods". That's why God did not want them to eat the fruit. Eve fell into Satan's trap by eating the forbidden fruit along with Adam and thus committed the first (original) sin, a sin of direct disobedience of God's will. Man's direct access to God was broken. Through Jesus, that direct connect to God would be restored.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the story of the three temptations of Jesus by Satan in the desert is recounted. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains the source of this Gospel story – "Series A preserves the traditional reading of the Matthean temptation account; series C substitutes the account given in Luke's Gospel. The two versions are practically identical in wording, and the commonly held view today is that both evangelists took the story from the lost common source known as Q. There is only one major difference between the two versions, namely, the order of the temptations. Matthew has bread-temple-mountain, and Luke has bread-mountain-temple. Since Matthew is more given to

the rearrangement of his sources than Luke, it seems more likely that it was Matthew who altered Q. Why did he do so? Probably because he wanted to bring together the two questions relating to Jesus as Son of God. This emphasizes that, for Matthew, Jesus' temptations are messianic in character. The order of Q-Luke, on the other hand, emphasizes that Jesus is the new Adam, the antitype of the first Adam, who fell when tempted in paradise (A. Feuillet)". After 40 days of fasting, Jesus was very hungry. Satan thought he had it easy by tempting Jesus with food. Jesus resists by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy (8:3). Next Satan tries sensationalism by telling Jesus to jump off the top parapet of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus resists again by quoting from scripture. Finally Satan tries greed by promising Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would only worship him. Jesus resists by again quoting scripture (Deuteronomy 6:13) – "The Lord, your God, shall you worship and Him alone shall you serve". Satan loses and departs for the time being. Unlike Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God, Jesus (the new Adam) obeyed God and thus restored our connection to Him.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* explains the ancient Near Eastern understanding of spirit as it applies to today's Gospel reading – "The Mediterranean world lives by a deeply rooted belief in spirits who exist in numbers too huge to count and whose major pastime is interfering capriciously in daily human life. Contemporary Mediterranean cultures, like the Italian or Spanish, rely upon a broad range of amulets, formulas, or other symbols to ward off attacks from spirits. Blue is a favorite color believed to be an especially powerful protection against spirits. People paint their window frames and door jambs blue or wear blue ribbons or clothes precisely for this reason. Others prefer red or scarlet, or wear specific medals, charms, or amulets that are guaranteed to impede attacks. When the voice from heaven identified Jesus at his baptism as "my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17), all the spirits heard this compliment. Every Mediterranean native knows what must and will happen next. Spirits will test Jesus to determine whether the compliment is indeed true, and just in case it might be true they will try to make him do something displeasing to God. It is no surprise, then, that the very next scene Matthew presents is "the temptation" Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. He was led by a good spirit into the wilderness, the normal habitat of spirits, where he did battle with an evil spirit, the devil. What is surprising in Matthew's narrative is that Jesus is not reported to be wearing blue garments or using an amulet or even special formulas for protection. Rather, he engages in direct one-on-one dialogue with this evil spirit in a Scripture-quoting contest. Matthew's purpose in this story is to present Jesus as the faithful and obedient Son of God, just as he was presented in the baptism story (Matt 3:13-17). The implied contrast of the obedient son, Jesus, with the disobedient son, Israel in the Exodus story, is deliberate. Those among Matthew's first readers who asked: "Why should I believe in Jesus?" are given culturally appropriate answers. Jesus is a model of obedience to God. He emerges victorious from his combat with the devil. He can safeguard and maintain his honor and avoid shame. Until his arrest, trial, and death, no one—human or spirit—succeeds in shaming him, tripping him up, or causing him to fall from his stated position and goals. This is the consequence of unflinching obedience to God. Americans in general do not believe that spirits cause them any problems. This cultural conviction is what made the comedian Flip Wilson's character, Geraldine, so amusing every time she resorted to her

favorite excuse: “The devil made me do it!” But Americans do understand power. They especially understand and resent abuse of power by those who should wield it for the benefit of others. Scholars point out that in the Gospels Jesus wields no power at all except in regard to spirits and demons. The story of Jesus’ refusal to abuse the power he possessed offers Americans something very relevant to ponder”.

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