

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

^{2:15} The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

^{3:1} Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Commentary

Background: *Genesis is the first book of the Bible. It begins with two versions of the creation story, neither of them intended to be scientific but telling us why we are on earth. In the story of Adam and Eve, it tells us that we are responsible, under God, for the care of all creation. It then continues with the stories of the patriarchs: Abraham (who enters into a covenant (or treaty) with God), Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.*

Our reading is excerpts from an epic tale about the creation of humanity, beginning from after the creation of "the heavens and the earth" (2:4), a time when the earth was semi--arid. Ancient peoples thought that there were waters under the earth. Seepage of this water was insufficient for cultivation; as yet there was no rain and "no one to till the ground" (2:5). At that time, God formed *human* (Hebrew: *adam*) "from the dust of the ground" (2:7) and gave him his spirit of life. God put *human* (as yet androgynous) in Eden (2:8), his earthly domain, to cultivate and care for it. God tells him he may eat the fruit of the trees there, except for two:

- that of "the knowledge of good and evil" (2:17), of complete knowledge and understanding (or of moral choice); and
- that of "life" (2:9, 3:3), of eternal life, of becoming divine.

If he does, he will “die”, i.e. be separated from God. God provides *human* with an equal “partner” (2:18) of *human’s* flesh. Thus the tale explains sex, of “Man” (2:23, Hebrew: *ish*) and “Woman” (*isha*).

At this point, the couple do not see shame in nudity, for their relationship to God is guiltless. Now the snake, a mischievous creature, (also a character in other ancient epics) appears. He sows doubt in the woman’s mind about what God has commanded, and she responds inaccurately (3:2): she adds “nor shall you touch it” (3:3). The snake suggests that God is trying to fool her: rather than *dying*, she will attain mastery of knowledge, and become divine (“like God”, 3:5). She finds this irresistible; she eats of its fruit and gives some to the man. Nudity is now embarrassing, for the couple has lost its innocent trusting relationship with God (3:8). In 3:8-19 God metes out punishment for disobeying his order:

- to the snake: it will lack legs and eat dust;
- to the woman: (a) despite the great pain of child-bearing, she will seek to bear more children; (b) (in an ancient society) man “shall rule over you”;
- to the man: (a) cultivation will be laborious; (b) he will die, returning to “dust”; and
- to all three: humans and snakes will be enemies.

Thus are explained some basic facts of life. But sin has not changed God’s intent: Eve is “mother of all living” (3:20) and God protects the couple by making “garments” (3:21) for them. To protect them from exceeding human limitations and becoming like gods, he expels them from Eden, into the ordinary world.

Reflection

If the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden were a play, which character would you most like to portray, and why? Possible roles: Adam, Eve, the Snake, and God.

Romans 5:12-19

^{5:12} Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned - ¹³ sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. ¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷ If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹ For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Commentary

Background: *Romans is the first epistle in the New Testament, although not the first to be written. Paul wrote it to the church at Rome, which included both Jews and Gentiles. His primary theme is the basics of the good news of Christ: salvation for all people.*

Paul has said that Christians, reconciled to God, will be saved, sharing in the risen life of Christ. Two notions are important here:

- the punishment for Adam's sin was to die both physically and spiritually ("death came through sin"); and
- we both sin ourselves and share in his sin ("spread to all").

Paul contrasts Adam and Christ, both inaugurators of eras. Adam foreshadowed Christ as head of humanity ("type", v. 14, precursor). Adam disobeyed God's direct command ("the transgression", v. 14, "the trespass", v. 15). The "free gift", i.e. Christ, is unlike Adam's sin:

- "many died" before Christ's coming but even more so are "many" (indeed all) saved through Christ;
- Adam was condemned to separation from God but Christ brings union with God (vv. 16, 18);
- Adam's sin allowed "death" (v. 17) to rule through the Devil ("that one") but we let good rule our hearts ("dominion in life"); and
- Adam's action led to the sin of many but Christ's will lead many to godliness (v. 19), to "eternal life" (v. 21).

Reflection

What does the "sin of Adam" mean to you? Reflect on the story presented in Genesis this week, and referenced here in Romans: what do you believe happened in "the Fall"?

Matthew 4:1-11

^{4:1} Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Commentary

In Mark, only the essential historical facts are recorded: those in vv. 1, 2 and 11c. The disciples probably knew none of the details of Jesus' trials, for temptation is essentially a personal inner

battle with one's conscience. "Forty days" (v. 2) reminds us of Moses and Elijah, both of whom also fasted for forty days as they prepared for their roles as God's agents to Israel – as does Jesus. All three of the temptations the Devil ("the tempter", v. 3, "Satan", v. 10) presents to Jesus are ways of sinning against the great commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, ... soul, and ... might". The "heart" was the seat of will, of moral choice; "soul" means *life*; "might" means possessions. (All Jesus' answers are from Deuteronomy 6-8.)

To change "stones" (v. 3) into bread would be to use his power for his personal benefit. Jesus says that the "word" (v. 4) of God is the chief nourishment. The "holy city" (v. 5) is Jerusalem; a "pinnacle" probably overlooked the temple courts and the deep Kidron Valley. Jesus answers: testing God's protection by unnecessarily risking life is a mockery of real martyrdom – and of his sacrifice to come (v. 7). The Devil, evil forces personified, invites Jesus to prefer personal wealth and power over love of God (vv. 8-9). Jesus answers: God is the only god to be worshipped and served (v. 10). The details make the point that Jesus is the perfect lover of God, the ideal Israelite, the founder of a new way of being human.

Reflection

How does this account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness speak to your own encounters with temptation? Does it help and encourage you in your walk of discipleship to know that even our Lord was tempted by the lures of political power, spiritual authority, and wealth?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 32: 1-6

^{32:1} Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

² **Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴ **For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah**

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

⁶ **Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.