

Using Our Freedom First Sunday of Lent/A March 9, 2014 9:00 AM
Gn 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Rom 5:12-19; Mt 4:1-11 (The greatest misunderstanding that underlies all sin is that there is any true happiness apart from God.)

Today's readings are extremely rich and a little complex. They are on the topic that is so important to all of us, the topic of freedom. What an appropriate way to begin the Lenten season by thinking about this great gift God has given us in our freedom, because **as Lent is a time of renewal, how can we renew ourselves except by reflecting on how are we using our freedom?**

The stories contrast two very different locations: **the garden and the desert**, the unreal and the real. First the garden. Eve, the purported mother of all the living, and her husband dwell in a land of unreal beauty in the true sense of the word "fantastic." Unreal abundance, anything they want they can have, except one thing: they cannot eat or even touch the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of course this is not really a tree of wood; it's a tree of knowledge. The author is trying to stretch our imagination, mixing metaphors even, for a good purpose. The meaning is that God has required that his image and likeness, embodied in Eve and Adam, **rely on a personal, intimate relationship with him to guide and direct their lives, to guide and direct their choices.** In other words, they cannot make decisions on their own apart from God. That's just not part of the story.

So enters the serpent, representing **a worldly kind of wisdom that pretends to know better than God. Eve allows herself, as we all have at some point, to be hoodwinked into doubting God's good intentions.** That's what is the base of all this, doubting God's good intentions toward her and her husband. "Of course you will not die," he prods. God wants to keep you ignorant. When you know good and evil you will be equal to God. Now ironically, **God's plan was to make his image and likeness equal to himself, but through a long process of formation and training and, I might say, discipline. But all this requires real trust in God, in God's goodness.** However, the payoff of immediate gratification seemed too good to pass up. It is very important that we see that this is not simply an act of disobedience, even though St. Paul uses that word. It's much more. It's really a lack of trust and gratitude. **All sin is a lack of trust and gratitude.** There is no one who shares life on this planet who does not have to confront this same temptation: **Is God really on my side? Can I trust the commandments as really wise guidance to a happy and fulfilled life, or should I take my life under my own direction? And there's always that age old worldly wisdom encouraging us to just suit ourselves.** That's the first story.

The second is about **Jesus in the desert.** Now this is on a whole new level. Jesus is not enjoying the best of everything, but is sorely tired and hungry. This is a real situation; this is the way we really are in life. **We are often sorely tired and hungry.** And how this **neediness often motivates grossly selfish behavior**, and in many people's minds justifies it! **Not in Jesus. He is different.** The devil knows this: he is different. That's all he knows at this point. He has seen the Holy Spirit descend upon him in his baptism, but he doesn't quite know what to make of him. **Who is this man? What is he going to do?**

The first temptation the devil puts forth is that Jesus use his power to feed himself bread. Well, that's reasonable. Why not? Why not is because ordinary bread is not what we really need. Well, we do, but it's not our real need, our deepest need. **We need to really yearn for the word of God. That's real bread.** How many people waste their lives away trying to fill the void inside of them with things, money, food, drugs, power. The list goes on. The emptiness is deep. It's profound. It's infinite. But as Jesus points out there is only one thing alone that feeds our true hunger: **the word of God that speaks to our hearts drawing us to love.** This is why we are created. This is why we are here.

Realizing this Jesus is a man of Spirit, the devil goes on. Hum, well, since you are so devout and religious, why don't you jump off the Temple? After all, "God won't let his beloved dash their foot against a stone," quoting Scripture, mocking religious belief. But that mockery does have a point because **a great temptation in religious people is to force God's hand, sometimes becoming a martyr at one's own hand or a fanatic.** And then how many people walk away from God altogether because, well, I prayed and my prayer wasn't answered? Well, I was in need and God wasn't there for me. You have heard that. I have heard that. Again, Jesus puts the matter in perspective. **God doesn't want to control us, but we cannot control God.** God is not the supreme fixer-upper. Our role is to find God's will, not bend it to our own.

So finally the devil takes the final step. The temptation, the boldest one, become my follower. Now what would ever motivate anyone to become a follower of the devil? Well, there are many benefits, many benefits—I don't even want to tell you! But—but—they are all short-lived, and our destiny is for eternal life beyond this world. **The greatest misunderstanding that underlies all sin is that there is any true happiness apart from God.** There just cannot be, not true happiness—temporary pleasure, contentment, excitement, yes, yes, but not real true happiness.

Jesus' entire life was a witness to the singular worthiness of God and the moral imperative of worshiping God above all else. Indeed his life defines for a Christian believer what worship is. It is living and acting as Jesus lived and acted. And, yes, we can, through his Spirit. The purpose of liturgy is to bring us into the mystery of Christ. The purpose of Christian witness is to live out the liturgy. **Back and forth we weave the strands of life and prayer into a garment of service to God and one another.** Before we can have open arms and open hearts to one another we need to open our hearts to God and let God embrace us with his arms. This season of Lent will give us many graced opportunities to let this happen.