

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

March 1, 2020 A

Note to Facilitator: If possible, set up a Lenten environment in the center of your meeting place (e.g., a purple cloth on a small table, an open Bible, a candle, a barren branch, a bowl of water) to remind us that we are preparing to renew our baptismal promises at Easter.

Note to seasonal groups and groups with new members: In his article on Small Christian Communities, priest/psychologist Msgr. Thomas J. Morgan writes: “Small Christian communities gather together to share their story in the context of God’s story as found in the sacred scriptures.... The Small Christian Community experience is not a discussion group. Rather, it is a sacred space where individual stories are shared and revered. It is done in the mirror of the great God story as revealed in the scriptures.... In this sacred sharing and listening, we see the seeds of conversion. When we share our faith, we grow in our faith. The sharing opens for us new vistas and new ways of visioning this one and only journey we are on.”

Excerpts from “Lent Conversion through Small Group Experiences” by Msgr. Thomas J. Morgan The Priest Magazine 2012 © Our Sunday Visitor Publishing. Used with Permission.

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Creator God, you formed the first man and woman from the clay of the earth and breathed into them the spirit of life, but they turned from you and sinned. We have also turned from you and your ways. During this Lenten season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, you call us back to you and to repent of our sins. Be with us when we face temptations. Give us the strength we need to remain faithful to you. Draw the Elect preparing to join the Church this Easter, and all of us, closer to you during this season. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week’s Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week’s Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: For *catechumens* (unbaptized) and *candidates* (already baptized), the season of Lent is a time of final preparation, purification and enlightenment prior to their Baptism and reception into Full Communion with our Church. For us, the already baptized, Lent is a *penitential season* during which we prepare to renew our baptismal commitment to Christ and his Church. In a spirit of solidarity, we journey with our brothers and sisters who are preparing for Baptism and/or entry into the Church. We pray for them and for ourselves that this season may be a time of renewal, purification and enlightenment for all of us.

Let us listen to God’s Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the first reading, the psalm and the second reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7

This is the story of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace, the loss of an intimate relationship with their Creator. The reading begins with the creation of the man. The man is brought to life by God’s breath, showing the absolute dependence of the creature on his Creator. Then God creates a beautiful garden, which the first man and woman are given to enjoy—with one stipulation, namely, that they are not to eat of the fruit from the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” in the middle of the garden. The tree presumably represents, on one hand, man’s ability to distinguish between good and evil and, on the other hand, the knowledge that belongs to God.

Enter the serpent, the most cunning of all creatures, tempting Eve to disobey her Creator. The serpent plants the seeds of doubt in Eve’s heart about God’s command and God’s love for her. She falls for the serpent’s irresistible challenge, “If you eat the forbidden fruit, you shall become like God.” In tempting us, Satan cleverly presents evil as some desirable good. The forbidden fruit was “pleasing to the eye” (sensual dimension of temptation) and “desirable for gaining wisdom” (intellectual dimension). Having succumbed to temptation, the woman leads her man into the sin of disobedience. Sin loves company.

Having sinned, Adam and Eve's "eyes are opened." They realize the wrong that they have done, and they experience shame. Sin always leads to inner disease within one's self. Adam and Eve cover themselves up with fig leaves (the first 'cover-up' story). If we read the Fall story in its entirety (Gen 3:1-24), we will see that Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience not only ruptured their relationship with God but also with each other and within their own selves. Harmony with God, with each other and with self, was replaced by discord.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 51

David recites his prayer of contrition after God opens his eyes to the poor choices he had made in committing adultery and planning a murder to cover up his sin of infidelity.

SECOND READING: Romans 5:12-19

Paul draws our attention to the universal consequences of the sin of our first parents. Sin is pervasive. It exists even when there is no law to convict us of it. Then Paul goes on to contrast the sin of Adam to the infinitely greater gift offered to us when Christ entered the world. If there is a "sin force" operating in the world and in us, there is an even *greater* "grace force" at work everywhere and in each one of us. While we may still struggle with sin and evil, we must remember that our baptism into Christ has given us the divine power to say 'no' to the enticements of sin and the evil one.

Original Sin. The sin of disobedience spoken about in this reading was called 'original sin' by St. Augustine in the fifth century. In a way that we cannot understand the sin of our first parents has had consequences for all humanity. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, each of us was born with a certain *inclination* or *tendency towards sin*. Original sin means that our natural powers for relating to God and choosing good have been weakened and our emotions and passions are disordered. We live with a certain resistance to the Holy Spirit. (For more on this topic, see our parish website www.ascensioncatholic.net Catechism Topics Article 4).

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 4:-11

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 4:1-11

At his baptism, Jesus becomes aware of his identity as the Son of God. Matthew presents God's Son as the new Moses who has the authority to bring the old law to its fulfillment.

Jesus resists every temptation to use his authority in any self-serving way. In each temptation, Satan seeks to coax Jesus into abusing his power to prove that he is the Son of God. In two of the three temptations, the devil begins by saying: "*If you are the Son of God...*" The setting for the temptations of Jesus is the desert, where the Israelites spent forty years and frequently succumbed to the temptations to disobey God.

The *first temptation* has to do with *hunger*. At the end of forty days of fasting, Jesus must have been very hungry. Satan tempts Jesus to prove his power by transforming stones into bread—to use his power for himself. The temptation recalls the hunger of the Israelites in the desert when they rejected the bread God offered them. Rebuking Satan, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3: "*One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" Unlike the Israelites who argued with God about the bread he provided for them, Jesus acquiesces to be fed and sustained by the living bread of God's Word.

In the *second temptation*, Satan lures the Son of God into demonstrating his power by using it in a sensational way, i.e., throwing himself down from the parapet of the temple. Refusing to yield to the devil's machinations, Jesus once again refutes Satan by quoting a Scripture passage that spoke about Israel's rebellion against God: "*You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test as you did at Massah*" (Deut 6:16).

The *third temptation* involves *idolatry*. Israel had failed this temptation many times, notably by their worship of the golden calf in the desert. Satan tempts Jesus to change his allegiance from God to him. Outraged at his tempter, Jesus tells Satan to get lost, saying: "*The Lord, your God shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.*" The temptations of Jesus remind us of a verse from Hebrews: "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with*

our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.” (4:15)

At the beginning of our Lenten journey, our Church places before us stories of temptation and testing—temptations which Adam and Eve gave into and temptations which Jesus resisted. Like Jesus, we too are tested by Satan to abuse and misuse the gifts God has given us. We too are tempted to forget our true identity as beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. During the forty days of Lent, we pray, fast and do almsgiving, so that we may have the strength to say ‘no’ to Satan and ‘yes’ to Jesus.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what verse or image in the readings caught your attention or draws you in. Was there a verse or aspect of the readings that challenged you?

The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.

2. When tempting us, Satan seeks to present evil as something good, e.g., eating the forbidden fruit will make you gods. Can you name how Satan does that today?

3. As stated in the piece at the end of the Second Reading, Original Sin leaves us wounded with a tendency or pull towards sin. How do you experience that in your life?

4. What can help us to be more aware of the devil’s temptations as we begin this holy season of Lent? What can help us to be more aware of the ‘grace force’ (see commentary on second reading) that is always available to us?

5. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestions: Be aware of how Satan seeks to pull you away from the ways of Jesus. Do some form of fasting.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist*

on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, as I begin this Lenten journey to Easter, help me to be aware of Satan’s temptations and give me the strength to say ‘no’ to them.*

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Let us now conclude with prayers of thanksgiving, petition and intercession. What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel

*Saint Michael the Archangel,
defend us in battle.*

*Be our defense against the wickedness
and snares of the devil.*

*May God rebuke him, we humbly pray;
and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host,
by the power of God,*

*cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits
who prowl about the world
seeking the ruin of souls.*

Amen.