

First Sunday of Lent

Year A, 2026

Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7 Rom 5:12-19

Ps 51

Mt 4:1-11

Temptation

Both in our first reading from Genesis and in the gospel today, we see how the evil one works to tempt. In Genesis, the evil one takes the form of a serpent, *“the most cunning of all the animals.”* In the Gospel, the evil one is called by three titles: the devil, the tempter, and Satan, a name that means accuser or adversary.

Temptation is a cunning adversary. By temptation, that is, by cunning adversity, came the Fall, when Adam and Eve sinned. Before the power of temptation, they faltered and failed. And this has been the lot of humankind ever since.

The tempter, as he is called in the gospel, approaches Jesus, when Jesus is at his weakest – fasting, hungry, tired – having been alone in the wilderness for forty days. And like with Adam and Eve, the tempter attempts to lay his trap. He speaks words that are soft and permissive, words that play to human need and human desire.

Adam and Eve were tempted to disobedience by their desire for special knowledge, which took the form of forbidden fruit. That special knowledge and the eating of the forbidden fruit revealed a desire for comfort and security. But they also revealed a profound lack of trust in God.

God is the great giver of gifts. The Holy Spirit is called the “giver of life,” and in the letter of James we read: *“all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights”* (Jas 1:17). In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples: *“Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him”* (Mt 7:9-11).

Everything that Adam and Eve needed or wanted, God was already giving them in the garden of Eden. But the cunning adversary made them think they were missing out, that instead of receiving from God, they had to take for themselves. Instead of reaching out to God – to ask him about good and evil, to ask him about being like God, to ask him to understand more about the fruit that God had forbidden them – they were impatient, unwilling to wait, and in their insecurity and doubt, they reached out to seize for themselves. We don’t trust that God will provide for us – enough pleasure or knowledge or food or fame or love or wealth or whatever – and so we try to take what we can. Taking instead of receiving, that’s not a bad way to understand the dynamic behind temptation, what makes us so susceptible to temptation.

By the way, this is also why it is better to talk about *receiving* holy communion instead of *taking* communion. The Eucharist is a gift to be received, not a something to be taken. It is received with open hands, in a gesture of humble pleading, asking, waiting, and not with grasping fingers that demand, that snatch, that take away.

Jesus, too, is tempted in a similar way. He is tempted to reveal a special knowledge (that he is the Son of God), by performing a miracle (turning stones into bread) and by eating that bread, comforting himself. But Jesus holds fast: God's word and will are his food, before the comfort of any earthly food. This is wisdom. This is true knowledge, a knowledge that brings true comfort.

The tempter again tries Jesus, tempting him to reveal a special knowledge (his status as the Son of God), by getting God to intervene to preserve his life from a deadly fall from the heights of the temple. Again, Jesus holds fast. He will not give in to the tempter's coaxing to make God "perform" and "prove" on demand. It is folly, not wisdom, and an offense to put God to the test.

For a third time, the adversary tempts Jesus, this time with power, prestige, position, wealth, authority: "I will give you all these things, and think of all the good you can do with them. Only bow down before me. Serve me. Acknowledge me." Jesus rebuffs his opponent, calls him out by name: "Away with you, Satan!" Jesus knows who he is (the Son of God) and that all that belongs to his Father is his, and all that is his belongs likewise to his Father (Jn 17:10). What need does Jesus have for the wretched and failing "magnificence" of the world? After all: "*The earth is the Lord's and all it holds, the world and those who dwell in it. For he founded it on the seas, established it over the rivers*" (Ps 24:1).

With these things in mind and encouraged by the example the Lord Jesus, we turn to ourselves, we who know temptation so well in our

daily lives, we who are so painfully aware of our undeniable weakness before the cunning adversary. Here is our reality before temptation:

The moment we think we're strong and beyond temptation is the moment we'll fall to temptation. Which is why the wise know to flee from temptation. The fool thinks he can resist temptation, so he sticks around when temptation comes. He thinks he can stand before the adversary, vie with the tempter, overcome Satan. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Or else the fool is unaware, inattentive, and then temptation sneaks in and overpowers him before he can act decisively against temptation. The adversary is cunning and strikes from hiding when we are distracted, or idle, or dulled, or defenseless.

When we are bored, when we have overindulged, when we are lonely, when we are tired ... this is when our defenses are down, when we are least aware of our surroundings and situation, when we are most likely to succumb to the allurements and enticements of our desire (Jas 1:14), be it a desire for novelty, or pleasure, or comfort, or power, or notice, or whatever. This is when temptations are likely to sneak up on us. The whispers of the cunning serpent continue to echo in the ears of the children of fallen Adam and Eve.

The best way to fight temptation is to flee temptation. That is not cowardice. It is right thinking. It is a clear-eyed assessment of our weakness and the tempter's strength. We are no match for temptation.

Does temptation arise when you're on the sofa? Get up off the sofa.

Does temptation come when you're in the kitchen? Shut the fridge, close the pantry, and don't go back in until mealtime.

Is your phone a source of temptation? Put it down and go outside. Do something wholesome, something real. Pro tip: remove all social media apps from your phone and use them only on your home computer.

Tempted when you're alone? Find company.

Tempted when you're in certain company? Find better company.

Tempted when you listen to the radio or watch television? Change the channel. Or better, turn it off.

Whether you're tempted by gluttony or lust, by gossip or shopping, by anger or laziness, flee the near occasion of sin at the first sign, at the first hint. Those who fail to flee often perish.

Has experience not taught us that temptation is a fire that cannot be contained or controlled? Haven't we learned that by now? Play with it, and it will burn you, and possibly even consume you.

Flee temptation, don't fight it. Flee temptation by finding God. You won't find God in the kitchen, or on the sofa, or on the phone if that's where you're being tempted. You'll find God in the opposite of those things. Yes, in prayer, but also in good company, in wholesome activity, in being out-of-doors, in restful leisure.

Finally, it must be said that God does not tempt us (James 1:12-15). It is not I who say this. It is written in the letter of James: *“[God] himself tempts no one. Rather, each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire conceives and brings forth sin, and when sin reaches maturity it gives birth to death”* (1:13-15).

What a clear and concise scriptural teaching! Temptation comes from our desire and lures us, entices us away from God and into the ways of sin and darkness. It is not God who leads me into temptation. It is my own weak desire for God, and the things of God, and the ways of God, and the holiness of God that leaves me prey to the wiles of the tempter.

Maybe I haven't the authority and power to command Satan, as Jesus did, "Away with you." But I know I have the wherewithal to command myself, "away from temptation." And then I flee. And as I flee away from sin, I flee unto God, who renews my strength (Is 40:31) as I take refuge in him, whom alone I worship, whom alone I serve.