

# The First Sunday in Lent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 9:8-15
<i>Response</i>	Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 3:18-22
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:12-15

Welcome every body to the beginning of our journey for this Lenten season. Today is the first Sunday of Lent in Year B, and so we're going to be journeying this year through the season of Lent, of course, with the gospel of Mark. And you might have noticed over the years, that every year at Lent, the first Sunday of Lent is always the story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert. That story is recorded in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And so today the Church is going to begin with the gospel reading being Mark's account of the temptation, and the first thing you're going to notice about Mark's account of the temptation is that it is by far the shortest, right. So most of us are probably a little more familiar with Matthew and Luke's account of Jesus' temptations, in which they catalog three temptations of Jesus, in which he dialogues with the devil, quoting Scripture to Satan, and then, you know, Satan departs and leaves him for a time. Mark tells us about Jesus's time in the desert, but he does so in a much more brief fashion. However, I hope you've seen already in our study of Mark, that just because Mark is shorter, doesn't mean that it's less meaningful. It doesn't mean that there's less there to examine, less there to study. In fact, sometimes Mark does a remarkable amount with very few verses. That's definitely the case here with the story of the temptation of Jesus. So let's read his account and then we'll unpack it. In Mark 1:12 and following, immediately after the account of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River, Mark says this:

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

That is a very short passage, but it is actually packed with some interesting questions. Number one, notice, what does Mark mean when he says “the spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness?” Second, notice that Mark's account of the temptation tells us something unique. It says not only was Jesus tempted by Satan, but it says that he was with the wild beasts and the angels ministered to him. It's only in Mark, so what does that mean? Why does Mark think it's so important for us to know that Jesus was with the wild beasts and that the angels ministered to him? What would that even mean the angels ministered to him? And then fourth and finally, why does the Church include the beginning of Jesus' ministry here, verses 14 and 15, about him coming into Galilee and beginning to preach this message of the kingdom being at hand, and to repent and believe in the gospel. What's that have to do with the temptations of Jesus? So we'll look at each one of those in turn.

First and foremost, number one. When it says the spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, Mark there is alluding directly to the Holy Spirit that has come upon Jesus in the baptism of John. So if you recall, when Jesus goes down into the waters of his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends from heaven in the form of a dove and, in a sense, anoints Jesus, consecrates Jesus to begin his public ministry. And so when he says the spirit drove Jesus into the desert there, it's fascinating, what he appears to be suggesting is that, in a sense, the journey of Jesus into the wilderness to be tested and tempted by the devil is the activity, it's the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ after his being baptized by John. So that's a fascinating insight. You'll also maybe notice there, that he says how did the Spirit drive him into the desert? Mark's favorite word, immediately. There's no wasted time in the gospel of Mark. It's immediately after his baptism. So that's the first thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Second element here about Mark's account is of course that Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days. Now if you've read the Bible, you know that numbers have meaning; that there are different numbers in the Bible that come up over and over and over again, and they have a certain symbolic meaning. When you see the number seven, it refers to the covenant. When you see the number 12, it symbolizes the 12 tribes of Israel. Whenever you see the number 40 in the Bible, it always symbolizes a time of testing, a time of tribulation, even a time of purification, so to speak, in certain cases. But it's always testing, it's always a time of testing. And so the 40 days of Jesus in the desert here, any first century Jew would've immediately thought of the 40 days and 40 nights of Noah's flood. So if you go back to the book of Genesis 7, it tells us that once the flood was unleashed upon the world, that it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. So that was a time of testing. It was a testing of Noah's faith and trust in God, but it was also a time of purification for the whole world, being cleansed by the waters of the flood.

Another reference there in the book of Numbers 14 is the 40 years that Israel was in the desert. And this one is much more obvious, because when it says that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, the Greek word there *erémos*, it can mean just like a wild place, where there isn't any habitation, any human dwelling. But it also often means the desert. In particular, the desert and deserted places in the southern part of Judea, around the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. So in this case, Jesus spending 40 days in the desert would've immediately called to mind to any first century Jew, Israel spending 40 years in the wilderness. Because what happened during their 40 years in the wilderness? They were tried, they were tested, they were tempted to commit sin. And unfortunately many of them did sin. They fell into idolatry, they fell into the sin of complaining, and yes, complaining is a sin. Rumbling against God, losing faith in him, right; complaining against Moses, rebelling against Moses. All that took place during those 40 years in the desert.

So there's an echo here of the flood and an echo of the Exodus, right. So, in a sense, Jesus is kind of recapitulating, he's recapping those times of the Old Testament in himself. He's like Israel in person, going out into the desert in order to be tested. But unlike the Israelites in the wilderness generation, who fell, Jesus is going to pass the test, right. He's not going to fall into sin, he's going to conquer the devil, right; who by the way, is the subject of the temptation there, who is it that

tempts Jesus? Well it is Satan. Now, we've already seen in Mark's gospel a clear emphasis on an interest in the demonic, right. We saw the man with the unclean spirit. We'll see Jesus perform a number of exorcisms over the course of the gospel. Well those exorcisms during his public ministry, in a sense, are really rooted in his initial triumph over Satan in the account of the temptation at the very beginning of the gospel. So because in Jewish tradition, Satan, whose name by the way, *satanás* in Greek, literally means the adversary, right, Satan was the chief of the fallen angels and he was the adversary, or the enemy of humankind, especially beginning with Adam and Eve. Also, he was the enemy of Israel. He was known as the accuser of Israel. He was the one who would accuse righteous Israelites before God, you know, call to mind their sins and seek to destroy them and to damn them. So when it says here that Jesus was tempted by the adversary, we see immediately, no pun intended there, I didn't mean to do that, that Jesus is engaging in spiritual warfare. That this Jesus isn't just going to just be a teacher. He isn't just going to be a preacher. He's going to be a man who is at war with the devil. A man who is at war with the enemies of God. A man who is at war with the spiritual forces of this present darkness, as Paul would say in Ephesians 6. So he begins his ministry with spiritual warfare, and although Satan is an evil spirit, Jesus is of course filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit that drives Jesus out into the desert to do battle with Satan during this 40 day period of testing and temptation before he enters into his public ministry.

Now pause there, before I forget, because I may as well forget this. That should be the clue to you as to why the Church chooses this for the First Sunday of Lent. Why does she do it? The answer's real simple. It's because during the 40 days of Lent, we are recapitulating Jesus. So just as Jesus recapitulated Israel in the desert, in Lent we recapitulate Jesus in the desert by entering into a 40 day period of testing, a 40 day period of spiritual battle, a 40 day period of being tempted to break your Lenten resolutions, right; of being tempted to not pray, to not fast, to not give alms, right, entering into that spiritual struggle. So with this gospel the Church is inviting us to enter into the mystery of Jesus in the desert.

Now with that said, I want to highlight one last element here that's particular to Mark's gospel. The other two gospels, the other two synoptic gospels, they mention the 40 days and 40 nights in the desert, but what about this reference to the wild

beasts? Well Mark doesn't tell us why he thinks that's important, but scholars and commentators of Mark's gospel have pointed out that if you look, it appears to be an illusion to one more Old Testament figure. In this case the figure of Adam. If you go back to the book of Genesis 2, when God makes Adam and puts him in the garden of Eden, he also places in the garden with Adam all of the "beasts of the field," right. And he brings them before Adam, you recall from the Old Testament, you know, to see if which one of them might be a companion. Of course none of them are, so he ends up making a woman for Adam, and Eve is created in Genesis 2. But Adam is with the beasts in the garden, and then in chapter 3, Satan comes into the garden and tempts Adam. And what does Adam do? Well does he pass the test? No. He fails the test and he brings sin and death upon the human race, upon himself, upon his wife, and upon his descendants. That's the story of Adam in the garden in Genesis 2. So what a number of scholars have suggested is in Mark's gospel, Mark not only sees Jesus as a new Israel, but he's showing us that Jesus is a new Adam as well. That just as Adam was in the garden with the beasts when he was tempted by Satan and fell, so now Jesus, the new Adam, is in the desert with the beasts when he is tempted by Satan. Because that's what sin did right, it turned the garden into a desert, brought suffering and death upon the human race. And now Jesus, tempted by Satan, is going to be tested just like Adam was tested, but he's going to pass the test, and instead of bringing sin and suffering and death, he's going to bring life and peace and righteousness and resurrection. So that's kind of a cool parallel there.

And you might say, well hold on, what about the angels ministering to Jesus, what does that mean? Well we don't know for sure what it means, but it is fascinating that in the ancient Jewish collection of traditions known as the Babylonian Talmud, in the tractate called Sanhedrin, paragraph 59 folio 59B, it tells us that one of the Rabbis said there was an ancient Jewish tradition that when Adam was in the garden of Eden, there were "ministering angels" that served him. They would actually prepare his food and drink and give it to him. So if that's what's being alluded to here in Mark 1, what Mark appears to be suggesting is that at the end of the 40 days, Jesus was fed by the angels. Which actually would make sense, because if you remember in the Old Testament, Elijah the prophet goes out to the desert and he too is fed supernaturally, with supernatural bread; a kind of miraculous feeding at the end of his 40 day period there. So Jesus is a new Israel, he's a new Noah,

he's a new Elijah, and he's also, and I think most importantly for Mark, he's a new Adam. Because let's face it, if spiritual warfare is Jesus' game, that's what he's up to, that's at the heart of his mission, then he has to undo what Adam did. Because Adam was the first one to fail at the battle with the devil in the Garden of Eden in chapter 2 and 3 of Genesis.

Alright, okay, so that's the background there. The final point here I'd make is, well what about the public ministry of Jesus? Why does the Church include the beginning of his ministry, where he goes out and starts teaching the gospel? Why doesn't it just stop with the account of his temptation? And I think that the answer lies in that last word there. When Jesus says repent and believe in the gospel, that's the message for us at the beginning of Lent. Lent is a time of repentance. The Greek word here for repent, *metanoia* or *metanoieó*, it means to change your mind, literally; so to change your mind about sin, to turn away from a life of sin, and to turn to God. Older translations of the Bible would actually translate it as do penance, right. In other words, offer sacrifice, fast, pray, as forms of spiritual warfare, and believe in the good news. So, that's the message of the Church for us at the beginning of Lent: repent and believe in the gospel. Okay. In fact, now that I think about it, it's one of the formulas that are pronounced on Ash Wednesday. You can either hear "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" or you can hear the words "repent and believe in the gospel." And that's taken from Jesus' words there, at the beginning of Mark's gospel in chapter 1, verse 15. Okay, so that's the gospel for this week. Very rich. Very short, but very rich. And that's Mark's gospel; classic case.

What about the Old Testament? Well in this case, if you go back to the Old Testament, the reading is from Genesis 9:8-15. Now you might think, oh well look Dr. Pitre, I know why that's there, it's there because you just mentioned Noah's Ark, the flood, 40 days and 40 nights, and so this is an account of Noah. And that might be one of the reasons it was chosen, but I just want to call to mind the fact that during the Lenten season, the rationale for organizing the first reading, the Old Testament reading, isn't based on what's called the principle of harmony. The principle of harmony means you relate the Old Testament to the New Testament gospel reading by some kind of typology, or clear thematic link. But that's not what the Church does during Lent with the Old Testament. During Lent, the Old Testament readings are chosen according to salvation history. It's meant to be a kind of chronological

overview of major events in the history of salvation from the Old Testament. And so, in this case, for year B, the Church starts with the covenant with Noah, which is one of the earliest moments in salvation history, and wants us to call to mind that covenant between God and humanity. Why does she do that? Well, because, remember Lent is a time of preparation for baptism for catechumens. So since ancient days in the Church, the readings for Lent would often be drawn from the book of Genesis and the book of Exodus, to take people through the story of salvation so that they would make sure that new Christians wouldn't just know the New Testament, but that they would know the basic moments of the Old Testament as well. And so in Genesis 9:8-15 these are the words we read:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

Alright, so this passage is basically a summary of what scholars call the Noahic covenant; the covenant between God and Noah, in which he promises that he will never destroy the world again by means of a flood. He enters into this sacred family bond, in other words, not just with Noah, but in a sense, with all creation, that he would never destroy the world in this way again. And the sign, the permanent sign of that relationship, is of course the rainbow, it's the rainbow. So in terms of salvation history, this covenant is extremely important, because it is the beginning, in a sense, of the new creation in the Old Testament. So the first world that God makes in Genesis 1-5 is destroyed by the flood in Genesis 6 and 7, but God's not giving up on his creation, he's not giving up on humanity. So the covenant with Noah is a

sign of the renewal of creation. And that's of course what Christ is ultimately going to accomplish through the Paschal mystery of his death and his resurrection that we're beginning to journey toward on this first week of Lent. We're heading to Easter, which is to be the ultimate restoration of creation, cleansing the world of sin, and then bringing about the resurrection of the dead, and the everlasting covenant between Christ and the Church.

And so the Psalm for today then is Psalm 25. And the basic theme there is that God blesses those who keep his covenant, who enter into that sacred relationship with him. That God is good and upright, and that he instructs sinners in the way. In other words, he's merciful. He knows we're sinners, right, that's what Lent's all about. Getting in touch with your sin and realizing I'm a sinner, it's my fault; turning away from it, doing penance, praying, fasting, giving alms, in order to prepare ourselves for the great act of redemption that Christ carried out on the cross. Well Psalm 25 is helping us remember that God loves us, and he blesses those who keep his covenant.

Before I end with a few comments from The Living Tradition, I would want to point out that just because it's Lent, the second reading in this case isn't on an independent track like it is in ordinary time. So, in ordinary time, we're usually walking through the Letters of Paul, it's almost always Paul, in order, on a kind of independent track. But during Lent, the Church picks the second reading thematically. So I'd would just like to highlight the fact that in this case, the second reading is from 1 Peter 3:18-22. This is the famous account of Christ descending into hell — that is the traditional interpretation — because Peter says in it that Christ “went and preached to the spirits in prison who had formally been disobedient in the days of Noah,” and then he goes on to say that the flood, and the fact that eight people were saved through water at the time of Noah is a type of baptism which “now saves you.” This is in chapter 3, verse 21, Peter says “baptism now saves you.” And I just want to highlight that one verse there. Why does the Church pick that particular verse? Well not just because it has an allusion to Noah, which we saw in the first reading, right; or an allusion to Christ's Paschal mystery, his death and resurrection, his descent into Hell, which we're preparing for; but also by that reference to baptism, because Lent is the time of preparation for catechumens who receive the sacrament of baptism at Easter. And so already, in this first week of



Lent, the Church is looking forward to that reception of the sacrament by those who are coming to the Church and reminding us that baptism isn't just an outward sign of inward faith. It's not just a public testimony to our belief in Christ, it is a saving sacrament that has the power to cleanse us from sin. Just like the flood cleanses the world, the water of baptism cleanses us from sin and prepares us for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Alright, so it's a cool, it's a really cool second reading there.

Alright now, I'll close, as always, with a couple of insights from The Living Tradition. What's the spiritual meaning of this passage that we could draw out? In this case, I've got two quotations. The first is from Pope Gregory the Great. He was writing in the 6th to 7th centuries A.D., and this is what he said in one of his sermons about the temptation of Jesus in the desert. A quick word of context. What he's doing in this sermon is he's answering the question, if Jesus was the son of God, if he's divine how could he actually be tempted? You've maybe wondered that before. I mean, how is it possible for God to be tempted? What would that look like? And this is what Saint Gregory said:

Temptation is brought to fulfillment by three stages: suggestion, delight, and consent. And we in temptation generally fall through delight and then through consent, for being begotten of the sin of the flesh we bear within us that through which we suffer conflict.

In other words, we're subject to concupiscence, that weakness and inclination to sin that we're born with as a result of original sin.

But God incarnate... came into the world without sin and so suffers no conflict within himself. He could therefore be tempted by suggestion, but the delight of sin could never touch his mind. So all these temptations of the devil are from without, not from within Him.<sup>2</sup>

That's from St. Gregory the Great, sermon 16. And I think if you reflect on that for a moment, it's really powerful to recognize that there's a difference between temptation and sin, and that it comes in stages. First, suggestion. Things can be suggest-

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory the Great, *Sermon 16*; trans. Oden and Hall, p. 17

ed to us from outside, or can come from within our mind, that are sinful, but you've not necessarily yet sinned, because the next stage is delight. In other words, if a sinful thought comes into my mind, do I take delight in it, or do I push it away? Do I reject it, right? That would be what's called delight. And then finally, consent, which is the final stage, is the choosing with the will. Consenting to act on the sinful suggestion, consenting to act on the sinful impulse, that's when we take it into our self, make it our own, and actually commit a sin. So when we're talking about Jesus in the desert here, what St. Gregory the Great is saying is he was tempted, but only in the first sense. In other words, the devil suggested things to him that would have been contrary to God's will, like turn these stones into bread, right, if you're hungry. That would've been something Jesus could feel, the natural hunger for food, if he's fasting for 40 days, and he could have that external suggestion from the devil to change the stones into the bread, even though Mark doesn't tell us about that. But he would not delight in that suggestion, and he, of course, would never consent to that suggestion. So he can experience temptation in the same way we experience temptation, but he never gives into temptation through either delight or consent. And in doing that, he conquers the devil and conquers the temptations that he faced in the wilderness. So that's the first thing. People ask me that all the time, how could Jesus be tempted? So I thought that'd be a cool insight to share.

The last one is from a much less well-known figure. I've never even heard of this guy until I actually read it. This is John Justice Landsberg. He was a 16th-century Catholic writer, Catholic spiritual writer, and he draws out a lesson for us about the temptation of Jesus that I think we would do really well to remember. This is what he says:

From this episode our first lesson is that human life on earth is a life of warfare, and the first thing Christians must expect is to be tempted by the devil. As Scripture tells us, we have to be prepared for temptation, for it is written: "When you enter God's service, prepare your soul for an ordeal" (Sirach 2:1).

So if you're committed to serving God, get ready for a fight. He says:

For this reason the Lord desires the newly baptized and recent converts to find comfort in his own example. Reading in the gospel that Christ too was tempted by the devil immediately after he was baptized, they will not

grown fainthearted and fearful if they experience keener temptations from the devil after their conversion than before...

That's really important. Maybe you're a new convert, maybe you're a new catechumen, about to become Catholic. Maybe you're somebody who's coming back to the Church after a long time being away from the Church. You're turning away from a life of sin, going back to confession this Lent and getting back into your spiritual life. That's great, those are all great, but don't be surprised if after that conversion things get tough. Don't be surprised if you start to face temptations and tribulations and sufferings that are even more intense than when you weren't trying to live a life of holiness, because Christian life is a battle. It's a spiritual battle and the devil is not going to lay off just because you've become a Christian or just because you've joined the Catholic Church or just because you've gone back to confession after 20 years or 10 years or five years or whatever. To the contrary, if Jesus is the model for us, after he's baptized, he's immediately driven out into the desert and the testing begins, the battle begins. So it's not less intense, it's more intense. So that's just a word of comfort, right, that if you experience more temptations after your conversion than before then that probably means you're on the right track, it probably means that you're making progress in the spiritual life, and so the battle is going to intensify. The second lesson, John Lansberg continues, he says:

The second lesson Christ desires to impress upon us by his own example is that we should not lightly expose ourselves to temptation, for we read that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness. Mindful of our frailty rather, we must be on the watch, praying not to be put to the test,

Like in the Lord's prayer.

and keeping ourselves clear of every occasion to temptation.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, if spiritual life is a battle, we also need to be prudent about that. We need to not unnecessarily expose ourselves to temptations that might cause us to fall. Instead, we need to pray more. We need to watch, that means keep visually, be vigilant, spiritually vigilant; prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Frequenting the sacraments, especially the sacrament of confession during the season of Lent; a very

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory the Great, *Sermon 16*; trans. Oden and Hall, p. 17

powerful sacrament for doing spiritual battle against sin and against temptation. So I just think those are some words of comfort there, not just for recent converts, but for people who've been living the spiritual life for a long time. Every Lent is a reminder to us that this life is a battle, and that we're not home yet. We're not in the promise land yet. We're still in the desert, at least for the next 40 days.