

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday in Lent – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

ACNA Readings – Genesis 2:4-9, 15-17, 25-3:7; Psalm 51; Romans 5:12-21; Matthew 4:1-11.

Introduction. In a world that struggles to acknowledge personal sin – except in the form of international tyrants – today's texts offer the preacher an extraordinary opportunity to defend his/her people against the corrosive acids of their sin and the soothing deceit of the culture. Two challenges confront our listeners. The first is the constant drumming of messages that oppose historic biblical teaching about sin, encouraging people to be self-centred – making sin systemic or 'others' making them sin. The second is that churched people are always tempted to think of themselves as less sinful than the world around them because they believe *the right thing* and are comparatively better behaved. These views deny them an understanding of how deeply grieved the Father is by the sins of the world and the self-centred rebellion of those he created. The result is to deprive contemporary disciples of an understanding of their need for forgiveness. This leads, unconsciously, to a devaluing of Jesus' work on the cross.

Common Theme. The texts for the first Sunday in Lent focus on temptation, sin, conviction, and forgiveness. Those themes permeate both the RCL and ACNA portions.

Music is abundant on these themes. From the traditional hymnal and the American gospel songbook come a wealth of familiar or once-familiar compositions: *Search Me Oh God, Alas and Did my Savior Bleed, Let All Mortal Flesh, 40 Days and 40 Nights, Lift High the Cross, At the Cross, How Deep the Father's Love, Beneath the Cross of Jesus, Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, and Hail Thou Once Despised Jesus* are examples of this deep genre.

The temptation will be to encourage the listener. We must be cautious lest our encouragement comes before conviction preventing the joy that arrives with forgiveness.

Genesis 2:4-9, 15-17, 25-3:7. The text connects to aspects of God's character that a Gentile reader may miss. The root sin was not simple disobedience to the command but a rejection of the Presence of God and the rightful claim he makes upon his creation to live their lives by his intended desires, not their own. Genesis 3:8 – immediately following today's text – describes God's intention for human and divine relations. The transcendent God walks with his finite creation – Adam and Eve – to be with them. This very Jewish idea underlies all of the Torah. God seeks to be with his people, and again and again, is rebuffed by their rebellion. That rebellion expresses itself as both moral sin and rejection of their identity as his people via syncretism with the pagan societies of the ancient world.

They were not holy as he is holy, violating the admonition of Leviticus 11:45 that is echoed by the Apostle Peter in his first letter 1 Peter 1:15. That same syncretism displays itself in new forms today when believers put their financial security, social standing, or materialism as a bolt-on accessory to their walk with God through the Messiah Jesus.

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The clear consequence of Adam's decision broke the relationship that allowed God to stroll through the garden with his created children. Each of us – sharing in that rebellion – is in broken fellowship with our heavenly Father until we – through repentance – allow Jesus to restore our relationship with him, as the Apostle Paul makes so clear in Romans 5:10 and Ephesians 2:16.

Psalm 32. King David begins with a radical assertion largely forgotten in contemporary preaching. In verses 1 and 2, he uses the Hebrew word **אֲשֵׁר** normally translated as blessed or fortunate. While an accurate translation, the concept of blessing is greatly diminished in current English usage over against the tangible meaning it had in David's time. The NRSV uses "happy", a particularly appealing dynamic translation that captures the wonderful consequence of repentance and forgiveness. The analysis that follows of the process of sin's burden and the consequences of carrying it over against the relief of confession and true repentance (see the Hebrew *teshuvah*) should be a profound experiential truth in the life of every disciple of Jesus. If it is missing, then the joy of a life of faith is much diminished as is gratitude to Jesus the Messiah for his sacrificial rescue.

The generally triumphant tone makes this psalm a real asset.

Romans 5:12-21. The Apostle summarizes the Father's plan of salvation in these three paragraphs. His starting place asserts the first sin as a world-changing disaster. Sin and the necessary death that limits its effect now pervades the world – *i.e.* the 'genetic' infection of human sin.

His next assertion appears to be a long parenthetical explanation – verses 13-17; explaining – with Talmudic precision – just how the consequences and the plan worked in God's legal economy. Torah defined sin. One man caused the problem, and one incredible man fixed it. The remedy was more powerful and wonderful than the cause. There is also an aspect of saving grace that emerges here on which a preacher might elaborate (Heb. 8:11-14).

The balance of the passage – following the *therefore* of verse 18 – offers the preacher an opportunity to teach justification by grace through faith as the solution God provided through Jesus for the agony of stricken conscience caused by sin. This grace goes beyond forgiveness. Human sin planted within every sinful heart the anticipatory fear of death. This grace allays that fear and promises the life that was intended before the fall.

An invitation to repentance, forgiveness, and discipleship follows naturally as a response to these texts. An invitation from the preacher for private discussion about following Jesus, reserving public declaration of loyalty to Christ left until baptism. A response of worship after the sermon by those

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forgiven and restored could be an appropriate response for a faithful, mature congregation, who has likely kept accounts short with the Lord.

Matthew 4:1-11. The gospel strikes a related but different tone and focuses on a different part of the reconciliation process. Two significant themes emerge:

1. temptation as the catalyst and means of sin being committed, and
2. the remarkable character of Jesus – his purity and strength in resisting temptation while functioning in human flesh (Heb. 4:14-16).

As a stand-alone text, the preacher can explore Satan's power and limitations as the tempter. The Genesis passage can buttress the exegesis. Other texts can then be used to form the response for those of us who, unlike Jesus, fail the test of temptation, sin, and need rescue. Alternatively, the response to the text can be guidance in resisting temptation and growing in discipleship. Growth can look different depending upon the Holy Spirit – both strengthening in resistance and also seeing through temptations to its demonic roots and consequences.

The preacher can also bring the temptations of Jesus into focus by demonstrating their typological significance: bread – a temptation of the physical appetites, security – protection regardless of behavior, and third – the temptations of power.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 51. David's anguish over adultery and murder could lead some readers to consider it not applicable to their less egregious sin. This text serves better for preaching than worship. Verses 3 and 4 show the candor and sense of personal responsibility required for a genuine confession. Verse 17 confirms – even in 900 BC – that God's forgiveness depends upon his grace, not human effort. Verse 6 cautions that true repentance resides with truthful recognition of sin in *the inward parts*.

Another teaching point appears in verse 5. David understands his sinful behavior to be rooted in a human nature corrupted by sin. "In sin my mother conceived me," he wrote, a statement that seems to imply the truth of what is commonly known as Original Sin. Jewish scholars for centuries have denied the doctrine asserting that human beings have the power to choose between right and wrong and are not fundamentally flawed. This verse, therefore, supports the inference of Genesis 2 and the Apostle Paul's interpretation in Roman 5.

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