First Sunday of Lent (A) March 5, 2017
Readings: Gen. 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Ps. 51; Rom. 5:12-19; Mt. 4:1-12
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The seven weeks of Lent are a period of preparation for the solemn celebration of Jesus’ death and resurrection (the paschal mystery) at the end of Holy Week. But the full meaning of these events unfolds in another seven weeks which extend to Pentecost Sunday when Christ’s victory over death and evil is complete in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The first two Sundays of Lent present the temptation and transfiguration of Jesus, which form a virtual epitome of the paschal mystery. Jesus, taking on human form, humbled himself even to death and was "tested" by his Father, yet this was a presage of his glorification (see Phil 2:6-11).

The traditional title “temptation” of Jesus is misleading since today we interpret this term, as enticement to sin. The Greek is better translated “testing” and evokes significant Old Testament themes, such as the testing of Israel in the wilderness (Deut 8:2,16; 13:3 and the testing of righteous people (e.g., Job), the servant of Isaiah 53 and the suffering just person, who though tested by God remains faithful and is called a child of God (Wis. 2:12-20; 5:1-2), see Heb. 2:18, "because he himself [Jesus] was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." Trial or testing also enables good people who undergo undeserved suffering to see in Jesus one who is compassionate and has suffered with them.

Today’s Gospel is a dramatic reversal of the origin of human evil from the first reading when Adam and Eve fail God’s testing when “the serpent” proposes to Adam and Eve that by disobeying God’s command “you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil.” Though as humans, they are created in the image of God, they want to transcend humanity and usurp the power of the Creator. The desire for power and the ability to determine what is good and evil is the foundational sin that infects our world today. Satan’s proposals to Jesus repeat the ancient temptation: to show that he is Son of God by startling demonstrations of divine power, stones into bread; command over the angels and the promised kingdoms of the world “in their magnificence.” The third response of Jesus is culmination of the struggle with Satan and the preface to the whole Gospel of Matthew, "Get away, Satan! It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve." Such worship and service will be found in the life and teaching of Jesus, which begins to unfold. Jesus invoked Scripture during his time of testing. There is no better Lent practice than prayerful reading of Scripture.
This Lent offers the occasion to reflect on that evil which results from the quest for unlimited power, “you will be like gods,” that same originating sin which drives toward control over nature and other people. Catholics today should cringe every time they hear the refrain that we are “the most powerful (“power-filled”) nation on earth.” Weakness is ridiculed and “sheer greed and the idolatry of money” (Pope Francis) blind national leaders to the needs of suffering and marginalized people.

The paradox of true power amid weakness permeates the Gospel of Matthew. Though called “God with us,” (Emmanuel) from his birth, as the Gospel unfolds, Jesus will not manifest his equality with God by demonstrations of self-serving power but as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Mt. 11:19), as the servant who will not break the bruised reed (12:20), and as one who draws to himself those who labor and are burdened not by overweening power, because he is meek and humble of heart. (11:29). By accepting the fullness of humanity, Jesus is truly Son of God. Only after his suffering and death can Jesus proclaim “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18).

Jesus resisted this primal temptation toward misuse of power, while emptying himself, so that we could experience true power: confidence that even when we are of little faith, we can hear his words, “take courage, it is I, do not be afraid” (14:27), liberation from the fear of death through his Passion and Cross, openness to see his presence not in the “kingdoms of the world in their magnificence,” but in the least of his brothers and sisters (25:31-46).