

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Genesis 2,7-9&3,1-7; Romans 5,12-19;Matthew 4,1-11*) Today's first reading tells us the story of the creation of our first parents, their temptation and fall from grace. The story is more theological than it is historical. It's message is that God created the human race to be happy and to share in his grace and friendship. This is symbolized by the Garden of Eden where our first parents had all their needs met. But things didn't turn out very well. We can see this story as an attempt to explain why there is evil in the world. It is a problem that St. Paul attempts to explain in today's second reading. In these passages we are told that evil finds its source in our decision to give in to temptation, to choose to make up our own rules, and to use our free will to say "no" to God. In the gospel, Jesus, who has come to save us from evil, has shown us how to resist temptation.

**HOMILY:**

On this first Sunday of Lent we hear two stories that take us from a garden of paradise to desert wilderness.

Adam and Eve had everything they needed including a wonderful relationship with God. They often would stroll around the grounds with God and converse with him. One day a deceptive creature appeared on the scene and convinced Eve that God had not been honest with them when he commanded they must not eat the fruit of a certain tree in the middle of the garden. The evil creature persuaded Eve there was a secret God was keeping from them - that if they ate the forbidden fruit, they would be as powerful and as great as God. Eve pondered this information and concluded if it looks good, it just has to be good. So she said to Adam: "let's party." Once they decided they would be like God and would have a part in ruling the whole universe, they ate from the tree. Instantly, they knew something was wrong. They felt shame and embarrassment; they felt exposed and wanted to hide. They felt they could no longer be open with each other or with their Creator. Not only did they try to cover over their bodies, they tried to cover over their disobedience and envy of God and their greed for power. The light and grace that God had blessed them with from the beginning, they had thrown away. Now darkness, guilt and regret had filled their hearts. Perhaps you remember this old joke about Adam who took his two sons, Cain and Abel for a walk one day. As they were passing the gates of Paradise, Adam told them "Fellows, that's where your mother ate us out of house and home." Paradise was over for them, and they continued to try to place their guilt elsewhere. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the dishonest creature that put her up to what she had done, and the evil creature had nowhere to place the guilt so he slithered away into the darkness.

Rebellion against God's plan has a long history. Humanity continues to drift away from a relationship with God and from the happiness he wanted for us. We now move to the desert wilderness of Judea. We find Jesus there. St. Mark tells us the Holy Spirit drove him into the desert where he prepared for his ministry. Especially before important events in his life, Jesus always was in touch with his Father in heaven. This was an especially important moment. He was now about to begin his mission of teaching and

healing and driving out demons. The devil, the great deceiver, is always busy. In Jesus' encounter with the evil one, the devil was trying to convince Jesus he should use his special powers for his own benefit; such as, changing stones into bread, beginning his ministry in a dramatic way by descending from the sky, or gaining, without any effort, power over the whole world. The devil knew the Scriptures and quoted them to Jesus in order to get Jesus to follow his lead. But Jesus knew Scripture just as well and was able to defeat Satan at his own game. Jesus saw through Satan's tricks. Jesus knew he could only be faithful to his Father and he had to dedicate his life to serving others. He was determined to do so.

How does all this fit together and have any meaning for us? The common denominator is the temptation to treat God as less than God. Compromising with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction. We constantly need to be grateful that we have a great high priest who knows what it is to be tempted, who will help us resist temptation, and by his grace, to help us show by our lives we acknowledge that only God is God.

**2nd Sunday in Lent – A Cycle**

**March 12, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Genesis, 12,1-4; II Timothy 1,8b-10; Matthew 17,1-9*) If we were to put a one word title on today's liturgy, I would think the word "Promises" would be appropriate. Our first reading takes us back almost 4000 years to the time of Abraham. His name was Abram before God gave him a vocation and changed his name to Abraham. Abram came from an ancient civilization known as Sumer, a settlement near modern day Kuwait. He migrated with his parents to the northern part of Syria, near Turkey. After a lengthy stay there, Abram heard God's call to leave his kinfolk behind and move to the land of Canaan - modern day Israel. To make this move, he had to leave behind a prosperous commercial area to settle in a land that was still relatively primitive and undeveloped. Abraham made this long and difficult journey at the tender age of 75 along with his wife, Sarah, who was 10 years younger. God was telling them, not only to pack up and move to an unknown territory, but to start a family there as well! It was a pure act of faith on the part of Abraham to follow God's call and to believe in the blessings God kept promising him, promises we hear in today's first reading. In the gospel, we have the account of the Transfiguration, which was a promise of Jesus' future glory in the resurrection and future glory for those who follow him faithfully.

**HOMILY:** God is a God who makes promises. God promised Abraham descendants too numerous to count. He promised him land. He promised him the world would be blessed because of him. All Abraham had to do was trust that God would be faithful. And Abraham trusted. Even when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham trusted. Abraham was a true man of faith.

In today's gospel we are called to trust in God's glory, a glory that Jesus shared with his Father. In the transfiguration he shared it with Peter, James and John. Even though they didn't always understand him, the apostles had to trust him. And we have to also. We have to trust that in Jesus is the fullness of God's glory. We have to trust that God speaks to us through Jesus for God said on the mountain "Listen to him."

We don't see him, just as his followers didn't see all that there was to see in him. We have to trust that Jesus is with us in his word and in the Eucharist. He feeds us and nourishes us through both the word and the Eucharist.

God promises that one day we will share in the glory of God. "I came that they will have life and have it to the full" Jesus tells us in John's gospel. (*Jn. 10,10*) St. Paul tells us as he told the Corinthians "All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory." (*II Cor. 3,18*) Until that time when God calls us to eternal happiness, we live in faith and hope, trusting in the Lord like Abraham and the Apostles.

There is much that could be said about the transfiguration. I could talk about the divine nature shining brightly from Jesus' face and clothing, or I could talk about Moses and Elijah, or the cloud and the voice of God the Father. I probably talked about all these things in the past 25 years. Still it is something of a mystery. Rather than going into great detail, I felt inspired to talk about the event as a promise, a promise that can only be understood in the light of the resurrection. That's why Jesus didn't want the apostles to talk about it until later. It will not be fully understood or experienced by us either until our own resurrection. But to gain that promise, we must listen to what Jesus has taught us. We have to trust that God will be faithful to his word and someday will bring us to experience his glory. That is when the mysteries of life and the greatness of God's love and glory will be fully revealed to us. Amen.

### **3rd Sunday in Lent – A Cycle**

**March 19, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Exodus 17,3-7; Romans 5,1-2.5-8; John 4,5-42*) In our first reading, we hear of an event that takes place as Moses is leading God's people through the desert to the Promised Land. It took place two or three months after having left Egypt. The people needed water. Although God had twice provided, in a miraculous way, food and water for them, they are now convinced God is abandoning them. Their demand for water reached the ears of Moses, and he was desperate as to what to do. They all should have presumed that God was not going to desert them. He had been with them day and night since they left Egypt. Why would he leave them on their own at this point of the journey? When Moses turned to God, it goes without saying that God did provide for their needs. The reading prepares us for the gospel when we hear Jesus offer "living water" to a woman he met at Jacob's well in Samaria. "Living water" could mean the gospel message or the Holy Spirit or it could be connected with baptism which is the sacrament of new life.

**HOMILY:** In writing my homily, I tried to picture myself eavesdropping on Jesus as he tells his apostles, who had been shopping in the village, about this interesting woman he met at the well. Jesus is getting thirsty and asks her for a drink. He could work another miracle, but he seems never to have worked a miracle to satisfy himself. How surprised the woman must have been when he spoke to her. In that culture men did not talk to women in public, and if a man did, it had better be his wife or his relative; also

Jews and Samaritans did not get along with each other; they were actually hostile at times. But Jesus broke through both boundaries of gender and race and asked for a drink of water. The woman's response sounded rather cold. I would imagine this is where she did give him a drink; the gospel doesn't tell us that, but it seems logical to me because this is where Jesus offers her living water. The gospel doesn't tell us if Jesus ever did get a drink of water, but I like to think of it that way. In her mind, the "living water" Jesus offered her would have been a spring or a flowing stream. She remarked how convenient that would be. Now if I were to comment on every verse in this gospel, we would be here for another hour. I do want to point out that throughout the conversation she was constantly changing the subject - especially when Jesus made a comment about her life-style. Jesus continued to keep the conversation moving in the direction he wanted it to go. At the end, he reveals himself as the messiah - and even more than the messiah. His response to her mention of the messiah was "I am." Often this is translated as "I am he." The original Greek has Jesus saying *Ego emi*, which is the name God gave Moses when Moses wanted to know God's name. It means "I am."

It is interesting to see how her faith grew - moving from her seeing Jesus as a man who was thirsty to being an apostle to her neighbors in the village. She was willing to be open to what she could understand, and her openness led her to share with the people of her village what she had found.

St. John's gospel paints a vivid picture of a person coming to faith and how Jesus leads them to holiness. For me, the moral of the story is that Jesus will draw anyone who is willing to be open with him, anyone who makes time to converse with him, he will draw that person into a deeper and deeper relationship with himself. We cannot move ahead in our spiritual journey without spending time with him. Once we have known his love, we must share it with others who might be open to it. Amen.

#### **4th Sunday in Lent - A Cycle**

**March 26, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading takes us back 1000 years before Christ. At that time Israel was being ruled by King Saul, Israel's first king. Saul had not pleased God, so God sent Samuel, his prophet, to anoint someone else who would replace Saul as king after Saul died. The person God wanted would be found among the sons of a man named Jesse who lived in Bethlehem. From what Samuel saw, all of Jesse's sons had the dignity and physical characteristics of potentially good leaders. The gift of sight is a great blessing, but God has the ability to see into each person's mind and heart, and it was David, a shepherd boy, whom God chose to be the next king. This reading prepares us for the gospel where we learn that even if we have 20/20 vision, we can still be blind in other ways. In the gospel Jesus gave the gift of sight to a man who was born blind. The man could see Jesus with his eyes, but only gradually did he come to see Jesus with his mind and heart. He is contrasted with the Jewish leaders who had eyes to see, but who were blinded in their hearts by jealousy, pride and arrogance.

**HOMILY:** I'm sure most people have heard by now that Fr. Stricker died this past week. Fr. Bob had a long life (93) and had quite a variety of assignments. He was head of the

library at the Seminary when I was a student there. In 1977 Fr. Bob came to St. Boniface and served the parish well as pastor until December 1991 when St. Patrick and St. Boniface merged and I took over as pastor. For a little over a year, St. Boniface was blest with his help in accomplishing the peaceful marriage of these two parishes. (Most mergers did not go so smoothly.) Fr. Bob had a good sense of humor, he was a deeply spiritual man and he was constantly devoted to serving God and God's people. Even in later years, when he was retired and living at Twin Towers, he would say Mass every day for the people there and minister to the sick. His heart doctor told him to move out of Twin Towers because he was working too hard. His last days were very hard on him, but God blessed him with a peaceful death.

I do want to say something about the gospel. In its entirety, St. John's gospel is profoundly spiritual and beautifully written. Today's gospel is especially beautiful. Fr. Ray Brown describes it as "a masterpiece of Johannine dramatic narrative." Whenever I do baptisms, I use the first part of the gospel to illustrate how the sacraments work. In the sacraments Jesus is present for the sacraments are actions of Christ, but we cannot see him. For obvious reasons, the blind man could not see him either. In this healing story, Jesus used something to heal a person. (This was very unusual, because Jesus usually healed simply by a word or a touch.) In today's gospel, Jesus used mud and he sent the blind man to the pool of Siloam to wash it off. Mud does not cure blindness (as all of us know), but in Jesus' hands it had healing power. Faith is also involved because if the man chose not to place his trust in Jesus, he would not have gone to the pool, and he would have just spent the rest of his life unable to see. In the sacrament of baptism, Jesus is present using the priest or deacon and water to give the gift of divine life to someone. If it is an infant, the infant is too young to have faith, but it is by the faith of the parents that their child receives God's grace. We can stretch this one step further and see how Jesus uses bread and wine at Mass to become our spiritual food.

John uses this incident to show how we are able to grow in our knowledge about Christ. First, the blind man saw Christ simply as a man (the man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes). Then he saw Jesus as a prophet. Then later he acknowledged Jesus to be a man from God. Finally, he professes that Jesus is the "Son of Man." Here the term "Son of Man" is an apocalyptic figure revealed in the Book of Daniel to whom God gave dominion, honor and kingship forever.

The whole story of the man born blind could be acted out dramatically whereby the one who was blind began to see, not just through his eyes but with faith in his heart. Those who could see were really the ones who were blind and chose to remain blind as they looked for some reason to condemn Jesus. We all have power within us to see Jesus in faith if we choose or to remain blind. Let us pray for a deeper faith as we continue to pray the greatest prayer we have. Amen.