

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 1st SUNDAY OF LENT (A)
Genesis 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7 Psalm 51 Romans 5: 12-19 Matthew 4: 1-11
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Ash Wednesday was a sobering reminder--- those ugly ashes smeared on our foreheads, dusted our jackets and sweaters. We quickly brushed them off our chests and maybe the ones on our foreheads lasted a bit longer. What a bleak reminder they were about our frailty; to put it bluntly, we all face a death sentence. We were born and we will have an end. There is no running away from our creatureliness. As we survey our successes, achievements and dominance, whether as individuals or a nation, we know they are ultimately limited. The grim reaper will come along and take us away and also those we love and all our projects. After a while our names will be forgotten. Not a cheery way to being a Sunday reflection! Those are morbid thoughts, aren't they?

But we must face the truth about who we are so that we can live our lives with perspective, in other words, live our true lives. Genesis reminds us that if we acknowledge we are creatures of dust, we can also express our belief that the Eternal One has placed a life-giving breath in us. (“God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life...”) This breath orients us to God, and calls us to follow God's ways. If we haven't been doing that, Lent is an opportunity to make necessary adjustments; in other words, to “reform.”

The gospel reminds us that during Lent we can look death, or anything that threatens our vocation to follow God, in the face and not be afraid, because Jesus has entered our desert experience and come out triumphant. He has preceded us into the place of temptation, the desert, and can help us get through our own deserts, the places where, like the Israelites, we wandered from the path. We do not have to be afraid, we are not alone and today at this eucharist Jesus will feed us himself, the desert bread that gives us life. There is consolation for us this Lent, even as we cast a sober glance over our lives, because we have been given hope that Jesus has looked into our darkness, seen us there and has come to pull us out. As God rescued the Israelites in their wanderings, so God comes again searching us out, bringing us home.

John Kavanagh, S.J. says that Lent is our Christian Yom Kippur, our time of critical self evaluation. It is a time to think things over, to reconsider and to be more aware of our limitations, our mortality and our need. It is a time, in other words, to remember that our lives need to be and can be, transformed by grace. Once more, through Christ, God breathes into us a life-giving Spirit. This dust we are has its origins and destiny in God.

We have forty days ahead of us to make some choices. It is “focus time”—it’s like going for an eye exam and the optometrist places those adjustable lens over your eyes and keeps asking, “Is it clearer now? How about now?” We have forty days to choose more positive ways of looking and acting. The scriptures will be like the lens the optometrist places before our eyes. We didn’t think we had impaired vision, but then we were given a better lens and the blurred letters cleared up. So it will be this Lent, as we listen to the scriptures and take them to heart, we will get our vision cleared. We will learn what Jesus taught us from the desert, “One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” God wants to breathe new life into us again through the life-giving Word.

Baseball players are starting Spring training. They need this time to get ready for the opening of the season and the long season of games that will take them into the Fall and possibly into World Series contention. Without this preparation time they will get off to a poor start and not make it successfully through the season. Like these athletes, each year, year after year, we need Lent. We need a time to refocus. We need a time to renew our baptismal vows, our commitment to Christ and our profession of faith. We notice our sinfulness and our tepid responses to the gospel; but more, we look to the one who saves us. We are reminded during Lent that we can break away from sin by the enabling grace of God.

The reform in Lent is both for the individual and the community. Together, especially at these liturgies, we are called to a more attentive listening to and acting on the Word. As we listen, we become more deeply unified, we hear our family story and claim it as the one we want to believe in and live by. We could make it our lenten practice then to be more attentive to these readings and even to prepare for liturgy by reading and reflecting on them in advance. (Most parishes list next Sunday’s readings in the bulletin---the preacher might refer to this.) The readings will discourage, even expose, our sin. But this not to laden us with guilt, as much

as to denounce sin and proclaim God's mercy. Thus, Lent is a joyful time when we become more deeply aware of God's saving grace for us.

Be careful in the Genesis reading not to make too much of Eve's first eating the fruit. Women have too long been portrayed in religion, literature and world cultures as the temptresses. The "Fall" from grace is our human story, not the fault of a first woman or man. In the Genesis account we are not hearing a factual "you-are-there" historical retelling. But we are hearing the truth—human beings have turned away from God. In the Genesis narrative we observe God lovingly creating humans, "by hand," breathing the divine life into them and planting a lovely garden for them to enjoy. But they turned away from God—the human story to this day.

No one needed to tell us that, we know the personal and social effects of sin on humans, institutions and God's own lovely garden—the natural world. We can't blame Adam and Eve for something they did "back then"—rather, we must claim responsibility in our own time and place for the choices we make. "The devil made me do it," is a lame excuse for what we have done or neglected to do. Like Adam and Eve we have a porous wall of resistance to sin's allures, glamor and false promises.

Thankfully we have not been left on our own. The gospel shows us that Jesus had more power than sin. With him we can overcome what we have not been able to on our own. Jesus resists the temptation to take care of his hungers by multiplying bread. He also resists the temptation to draw crowds by spectacular wonders and miracles. God will provide him and us the food we really need, when we need it—our "daily bread."

Jesus also resists the temptation to go through life on an easy ride; expecting no pain or harm to befall him. As the "beloved" shouldn't he expect God to protect him? And, if we are loved by God, why must we suffer? Jesus doesn't doubt God's love for him, even when he "falls" into the hands of those who hate him and reject his message.

Jesus could have possessed the world with all its power and splendor. That would certainly have attracted multitudes to his message. But Jesus kept his eyes fixed on his God and would not sway from his calling as a servant, to become an earthly

ruler. Through his strength we are made strong. Because of his clear-eyed vision we can see the difference between what is alluring—but passing and what has lasting value—and offers life.

Let's come to the eucharist today aware of our deep-down hunger for God, who gives us Jesus' life for strength and his Spirit for guidance for our own particular wilderness struggle.

READER'S RESPONSE:

[Just a note about Eve. Last time these readings appeared, one of your readers suggested that we need a new story because Eve was tempted as the weaker of the characters and that doesn't play very well today.]

In fact, Eve is not the weaker character. She is the only creature not made directly from the dust - sort of a cloning operation by God through the use of a rib. (Hebrew: a cutlet!) According to the myth, she is the first person to discuss and to reflect and to answer a question on what God has said. She is the first Theologian!

Remember, that according to the myth, she was not yet "born" when God gives the command to Adam not to eat of the tree. And when the serpent asks "Are you not allowed to eat of ANY of the trees in the garden. (That all or nothing way of putting things that Puritans of both Protestant and Catholic stripe adore.) She corrects the snake, saying that there is but one tree that is in the center of the garden... and that we cannot eat it, nor even touch it, or else we will die! The addition of dying from touching the fruit or the tree has to have been made by the only person who was there when the law was given - unless the Lord gave the command again to Eve.

The serpent gives rationale why God would have lied - God didn't want them knowing right and wrong, because that would give them power and security. Also God didn't want them to be as smart as God!

The woman gives three good reasons for eating the fruit.

It is Good for food (nutritious)

It is appealing to the eye (aesthetic reasons)

It will make one wise (educational experience!)

Only then does she eat, and she gives her husband

WHO IS WITH HER for the whole discussion - and he eats it without a single thought. Who is the weaker? When God asks where Adam is and what is this that he has done, it appears at first blush that the man is blaming the woman for giving him the food, but not so! "The woman YOU GAVE ME, she gave me some and I ate." Adam actually blames God for Adam's eating the fruit. So how strong is that? Eve blames the serpent for beguiling her - which the serpent did...

Rather us men thinking of ourselves as Adam in the story and asking women to think of themselves as Eve, let's all think of ourselves as Adam when we sit like bumps on logs, without reflection or listening or caring - and then fall for temptation. And let's think of ourselves as Eve when we are more scrupulous than God about the rules, or when we get suckered into a temptation scene pretending to be a theological discussion, or when we can think of at least 3 good "growth experience" reasons why we should do what God's voice is saying to avoid.

Rev. Dr Steve Wayles (1st Congregational UCC, Phoenix, AZ)

ONE GOOD SOURCE FOR REFLECTION ON THE PSALMS

Steven D. Ryan, OP writes a weekly reflection on the Sunday Psalm response to the first reading. He calls his reflection, "Hagut: The Meditation of My Heart." You can find it on Google or go directly to http://www.hagut-jp2cc.org/p40_01_16.htm

JUSTICE NOTES

(Since one of today's gospel temptations is about bread....here is a note about another kind of bread, from "The Bread for the World Newsletter," December, 2004)

Write to your members of Congress telling them of your concern for hungry and poor people. Ask them to make hungry people a priority in the new congressional session.

Points to make:

- For the last four years, hunger has been on the rise, here in the United States and around the world.
- In 2000, the United States and 188 other countries adopted the Millennium Development goals, a set of international development goals that aim to significantly reduce the devastation caused by global hunger and poverty.
- In 2000, the U.S. government also set a more aggressive goal for reducing U.S. Hunger: to cut in half the proportion of people in the United States who

are food insecure by 2010.
U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20015
U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com