

Lesson 1

First Sunday in Lent

The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:9–15

In the Three-Year Lectionary, all three series assign the Temptation of Jesus to be the Holy Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent. This is fitting, for the season focuses on our Lord's ministry as Representative Man, and His temptation surely was part of that. Lent is traditionally a time for fasting and introspection. But the Sundays are called Sundays *in* Lent. They are breaks in the "40-day Lenten fast," for Sundays are "little Easters," a time for celebrating, not fasting. The Holy Gospels for Sundays in Lent, however, do point to the time of Jesus' suffering and its significance for our redemption.

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, it was not as an act of repentance for His own sins, but it was the right way for Him to begin ministry. Thus He put Himself in the place of all sinners, "to fulfill all righteousness," as Matthew's Gospel puts it (3:15). His saving work ultimately would involve Him in the same stance when He would carry our sins in His body and give Himself in suffering and death as God's atoning sacrifice on the cross.

1. Why was the Spirit given to Jesus at His Baptism? (See Isaiah 61:1.) Why did the Spirit descend in visible form like a dove? (See John 1:32–34.) What significance is there in the fact that the Father spoke His affirming words at this time?

2. How does this event underscore the Christian doctrine of God's revelation of Himself as the Holy Trinity?

"[When] Jesus came up out of the water" cannot be used to argue exclusively for baptizing by immersion. Jewish tradition included many "baptisms," religious applications of water. The probability is that John stood in a shallow eddy and baptized by scooping up water and pouring it on those who came down into the water to him. "Came up out of the water" simply means Jesus returned to the river's bank.

Jesus' testing in the desert followed immediately after the exalting experience of His Baptism, when the voice from heaven identified Him as the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit came to fill Him with power for His ministry. "Immediately" the Spirit sent Him out to be tested. This sequence of events has been the experience of many.

3. Why is a time of spiritual uplifting so often followed by a time of testing? Why was it important that the man, Jesus, face Satan's testing immediately and alone as He began His public ministry?

8. Why did this test of Abraham's faith and obedience focus on Isaac and require that Isaac be surrendered to the Lord? What did his obedience to this difficult command do for Abraham? What did seeing his father's dedication to the Lord do for Isaac?

Abraham was sent to the region of Mount Moriah. Bible scholars identify this as the mountain that later became the site of the temple (see 2 Chronicles 3:1). This adds significantly to the incident's typological nature. Abraham's heroic faith that "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering" was virtually prophetic of the many lambs that would be offered on the great altar of the temple. This father, willing to offer up his son at this site, was a type of the heavenly Father, who gave His Son for our redemption through His death outside the wall of Jerusalem.

"The angel of the LORD" stopped the sacrifice. This phrase was often used in the Old Testament to indicate a revelation by God of Himself as Rescuer or Redeemer. The traditional interpretation of this passage sees the angel as a preincarnate manifestation of the Son of God, acting as God's Messenger.

9. What does the Lord's "Now I know that you fear God" say about Abraham and his faith and commitment? What, next to God, is of highest priority to you in your life? How might you be called on to surrender what you value most to God? How can you take a conscious step in doing that now in your life?

Abraham's heroic faith was rewarded. God did provide a ram for the offering, and Abraham called the place *Yahweh-jireh*, "The LORD Will Provide."

10. How is it significant that God prescribed not only *what* Abraham was to do but also *where* he was to do it? Does it make a difference in our lives *where* we take our steps of surrender to the Lord?

11. When Abraham had successfully passed the difficult test, the angel of the Lord called a second time to Abraham. What part of the promise was stated again at this time that is especially significant to us?

12. How does this lesson tie in with the Holy Gospel for today?

The Epistle for the Day: James 1:12–18

James wrote to Jewish Christians who had fled Jerusalem to take up life in the villages of Judea and Samaria. He understood their circumstances. They were not being actively persecuted by their fellow Jews, but their establishing their own messianic synagogues or house churches probably had led to their being shunned by other villagers and possibly had disadvantaged them economically. They were being

put to the test regarding their faith in Jesus as the Promised One and their allegiance to the fellowship of believers.

James offers a two-step process in dealing with temptation. Both steps require honesty and faithful acceptance of God's Word on the matter. They require not just our intellectual agreement that they are good principles, but our putting them into practice in our daily living.

13. What does James's first step require of us? What results when we are not ready to take personal responsibility for our sinfulness and our sinning? (See Genesis 3:10–13.) What is the deadly process that takes place when we nourish sinful desires? If we may not say "God made me do it," may we say "The devil made me do it"? (See John 16:7–11.) How may we apply in practical ways James's truth about what causes sin?

14. What does James's second step require of us? In our struggle with the deadly process that is the result of giving in to sinful desires, what will the Gospel of Jesus do for us that God's Law cannot do for us?