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Preface

In my previous book, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina*, I pondered the tradition of lectio divina and explored ways in which this ancient art could be cultivated by people in our day. I reflected on the movements—lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio, and operatio—and suggested ways that readers might incorporate lectio divina into their lives as disciples. I concluded with a few examples of how selected passages of Scripture could be taken up in lectio divina and lead the reader to interior transformation.

Since the publication of that book, interest in lectio divina has continued to grow, not only in its seedbed within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, but in Protestant and Evangelical communities as well. Christians everywhere are rediscovering the rich potential of this ancient practice. The worldwide Synod of Bishops and the recent teachings of Pope Benedict XVI have encouraged lectio divina for all the people of God.

A favorable response to my first book prompted The Word Among Us Press to ask me to continue this ancient yet contemporary approach to lectio divina with the Lectionary readings of the Lenten season. What follows is a consideration of the tradition of lectio divina during Lent and an exposition of the Sunday readings of the Lectionary based on the five established movements of the practice.

As in the previous book, I have created a work that can be used either privately or in groups. Individuals may use this for their own Lenten practice, or churches and communities may wish to

incorporate this work into their Lenten journey together. It is also written with the catechumenal community in mind, since a prayerful reflection on the Lectionary of Lent is one of the most ancient forms of spiritual growth for the Elect who are preparing to enter the church and celebrate the Easter mysteries.

How To Use This Book

If you choose to use this book for your own personal growth during this season, simply spend some quiet time during each week of Lent with the Scriptures of the upcoming Sunday. The five movements of lectio divina will guide you through the reflective process. Led by the Holy Spirit, you can expect to be changed and renewed by God's living word through this ancient practice. Realize this book is only a guide, and that you should feel free to follow as many or as few of the suggestions as you choose. Do not think, for example, that you must meditate on each of the questions provided. You will be led to reflect on whatever God's Spirit brings to your mind and heart after each Scripture.

If you choose to follow this book with a small group, you will reap the wisdom and support of others, which can be an enormous help in experiencing the transforming power of Scripture (see the chapter "Collatio: Forming Community Through Scripture" from my previous book). Groups should meet once a week during Lent to reflect together on the Scriptures for the upcoming Sunday, or they may meet immediately after the Mass to continue the prayerful listening to that Sunday's readings. Members should read the first two chapters of this book in advance, and if they wish, may reflect on the questions of the meditatio at home before coming to the group. A facilitator guides the group through each step of lectio

divina, honoring each movement with the attention it requires. Most of the discussion will center on the questions of the meditatio, but the group should feel free to decide which questions to consider and should not be compelled to discuss them all.

This work would also be an ideal way for the whole parish to enter into prayerful unity with the catechumens and candidates of the parish during Lent. The Elect and those called to continuing conversion may use this book as they are sent forth from the Lenten liturgy to reflect more deeply on the word of God. The rest of the community may follow this lectio divina on the same Scriptures, either individually or in small groups, during the week.

As you ponder the perennial question this year, "What are you going to do for Lent?" I invite you not just to give something up but to take something up as well. Take up the time-honored practice of lectio divina during this season and savor its grace.

Stephen J. Binz

Christianity's most ardent activists have also been the most fervent contemplatives. *Lectio divina* helps us to be contemplative activists and active contemplatives.

Lectio divina is not so much a matter of interpreting a written text as of seeking Christ and learning to be his disciple. He is the living Word to whom all the other words of Scripture bear witness. Through listening, reflecting, and praying on Scripture, our hearts and minds are formed in the way of Christ, as we deepen our relationship with him. As we develop this personal bond with Christ, our actions become an imitation of Christ and vehicles of his presence to others.

As our discipleship deepens through *lectio divina*, we seek to be totally identified with Christ. We desire to live "in Christ," and we experience Christ working within us, with our lives animated by his Spirit. Rather than wanting to imitate Christ, we begin to experience Christ working through us, and our actions become more his work than our own. In *contemplatio*, Christ prays within us, and in *operatio*, Christ becomes the doer of our actions. In this mystical bond with Christ, we see the true depth of discipleship that *lectio divina* can create within us.

Chapter Three

Lectio Divina for Lent: Year A First Sunday of Lent

LECTIO



Close off the distractions of the day and enter a still moment for your time with the inspired word. Inhale and exhale slowly, becoming aware of your breathing as you recognize each breath as a gift from God. Breathe in, being filled with the presence of God's Spirit. Breathe out, letting go of all that could distract you from this sacred time.

Begin reading when you feel ready to hear God's voice. Read this familiar text as if for the first time, trying to let go of your own presumptions so that you can listen to God speaking to you anew.

GENESIS 2:7-9; 3:1-7

The LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.

Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made various trees grow that were delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the LORD God had made. The serpent asked the woman, “Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?” The woman answered the serpent: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman: “You certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil.” The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

This colorful account of creation and sin is so rich in images and symbolism that commentators have spent volumes exploring its allusions and implications. God forms the human (*’adam* in Hebrew) from the ground (*’adama* in Hebrew). God gives life to his clay creature by breathing in the divine breath. Lovingly shaped by God and infused with his very spirit, the human creature is a masterpiece of our creating God. The Creator places his newly fashioned human in a garden full of beautiful and nourishing trees. This bountiful God not only offers gifts in abundance

but also permeates the garden with his presence and continually offers care and companionship.

After pausing to let the words and images sink in, begin reading the gospel when you are ready. You will move from the lush garden to the dry desert. Read this familiar account, too, as if for the first time. Listen with expectation, confident that God will teach you something new through the words of the Gospel according to Matthew.

MATTHEW 4:1-11

At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. The tempter approached and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.” He said in reply, “It is written:

*One does not live on bread alone,
but on every word that comes forth
from the mouth of God.”*

Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written:

*He will command his angels concerning you
and with their hands they will support you,
lest you dash your foot against a stone.”*

Jesus answered him, “Again it is written, *You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.*” Then the devil took him up

to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.” At this, Jesus said to him, “Get away, Satan! It is written:

*The Lord, your God, shall you worship
and him alone shall you serve.”*

Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

The juxtaposition of the verdant garden and the barren desert highlights the contrast in these two scenes as the human couple and Jesus himself are put to the test. In each narrative, the subjects are tested in their fidelity to their identity and their obedience to God’s will. The tempter in the garden and in the desert distorts the word of God and uses it to his own advantage. He confronts his prey with timeless temptations—to deny who they are, to overreach and take what is not theirs, to want to be “like God,” to deny that God can ask them to trust their greatest good to him.

In the story of the garden, we sometimes fail to realize that God’s permission is far wider than his prohibition. God permits the couple almost total freedom and access to the riches of the garden, and he provides them abundant life, meaningful purpose, and harmonious relationships. God prohibits the fruit of only one tree, because eating from that tree leads to death. It is their condition of restraint so that they may continue to enjoy the fullness of life.

But when the cunning serpent enters the garden, he distorts God’s permission and prohibition concerning the fruit of the trees.

With enticing seduction, the serpent goes on to deny that death would be the inevitable consequence for rejecting the limitations God has placed on them. The tempter suggests instead that the woman and man would be like God, possessing great knowledge and able to determine for themselves what is good and what is evil. The Lord of the garden, who has bestowed such wondrous gifts and abundant freedom, is presented by the serpent as one who wants to confine rather than provide. The safe boundaries God has established for the couple’s well-being in the garden now seem to them like a restriction upon their freedom and autonomy.

After considering the serpent’s distorted line of reasoning and her newly acquired desire to taste the tree’s fruit, the woman takes some of its fruit and eats it. Then she gives some to her husband, who is with her, and he eats it. There is no sense here that the woman enticed the man to disobedience. They were both present during the testing, and each of them ate freely. They act in total accord and sin as a pair. By refusing to trust God and his loving will for them, their choice brings shame and fear, mistrust of God and one another, and evasion of responsibility.

This ancient story offers profound insight into the human predicament. Through representational figures, symbolic language, and Hebrew wordplays, the narrator speaks to and about all women and men. The desires and responses of the man and the woman, and consequently their dilemma, characterize the experience of all humankind. The transgression depicted is not simply the first sin, it is all human sin; it is my sin. We who listen to this ancient story know that our sin, too, has cosmic dimensions, that our transgressions influence the relationship of humankind with God, that our failure to heed the boundaries

that God has established affects the trustful relationship he wishes to share with his people.

The gospel scene in the desert presents Jesus being tested in his fidelity to his identity and in his obedience to his Father. While the tempter distorts and misuses the Scriptures, Jesus is shown to be the one who listens to God’s word and fully embodies the Scriptures in his own life. Jesus does not overreach his messianic role, misuse his power, or allow his liberty to become license. His power and freedom do not become self-serving, but are put in service of his divine mission.

As the new Adam, Jesus Christ supplants the sin of humankind and personifies the life of grace. What humanity did through disobedience, Christ has undone through his obedience. Where humanity failed, Christ succeeded. Where death reigned through sin, so much more will life reign through the love of Christ that led to the cross.

MEDITATIO



The challenge of meditatio is to continue reflecting on the scriptural narratives until they become a mirror in which we see our own reflection. Recognize within the text your own temptations, sins, challenges, and failures.

- The dust of the ground (our material reality) and the breath/spirit of God (our spiritual reality) are both good, both gifts of God and important elements of our human existence. Both must be kept in balance if we are to live in harmony with God, ourselves, other people, and with

the rest of creation. What happens to that harmony if we smother the spirit? What happens if we deny the dust?

- How is Lent the right time to focus on the balance between our dust and our spirit? How can the disciplines of Lent help you maintain harmony with God, within yourself, with other people, and with the rest of creation?
- Through human choice, God’s purpose for man and woman, with its wide permission and necessary prohibition, is disturbed and distorted. What new understandings have you gained by reading these passages afresh, “as if for the first time”?
- Humanity’s perennial temptation is to usurp the power of the Creator and to use that power for self-serving purposes. Reflect on humanity’s drive for control of nature and other people, and consider the massive horrors that have resulted over the last century from the human quest for unlimited power. How can the issues of power and dominance distort God’s purposes for your life?
- Jesus resisted the primal temptation toward misuse of power while emptying himself to experience true power. His temptations in the desert strengthened him for his final conquest of sin on the cross. How is my human effort less a conquest of sin and more a surrender to Christ?

ORATIO



Cry out to God in the midst of your trial and testing, knowing that he has conquered sin in his Son Jesus and gives you the strength to overcome the creaturely tendency to rebel, revolt, and diminish your humanity.

Begin with this prayer and continue to pray as your heart directs you:

I cry out to you, Creator God, to help me know my true identity, created in your image and destined for life in its fullness. Help me to live as a creature of dust and spirit, humbly aware of my frailty and attentive to my eternal dignity.

CONTEMPLATIO



In your imagination, place yourself either in the garden or the desert. Know that God is with you there with his encouraging and supportive presence. Place yourself completely in God's care, trusting in his unlimited grace. Remain in this place for a period of prolonged silence.

OPERATIO



Consider how God is molding and shaping you through this experience of lectio divina. How is your mind or heart different after having prayerfully reflected on these Lenten narratives? What does God want from you during this week of Lent?

Second Sunday of Lent

LECTIO



Place a cross or icon in front of you, light a candle, or find another visible symbol to help sanctify and purify the space you have chosen to hear God's word. Call upon the same Holy Spirit who inspired the sacred writers to fill your heart and kindle in you the fire of divine love.

Read aloud, vocalizing the words of the text so that you not only read with your eyes but hear with your ears. Listen to God's word with the ears of your heart.

GENESIS 12:1-4A

The LORD said to Abram: "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you.

"I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you
and curse those who curse you.

All the communities of the earth
shall find blessing in you."

Abram went as the LORD directed him.