

1st SUNDAY OF LENT – C (February 21, 2010)

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Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we hear an account of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert; this year we hear Luke's version. It may surprise us to think of Jesus experiencing temptation in the first place—how could the very Son of God face such a messy reality? Well, he did experience temptation, and very directly. Though he had that divine nature, he also had a human nature that knew everything that our human nature knows...including temptation. And let's remember Jesus' weakened condition after battling fierce desert conditions for a prolonged period of time without any food. To say as St. Luke does that Jesus "was hungry" is surely one of the understatements of all time.

The beginning of this Lenten season is a timely opportunity to reflect on the reality of temptation in our own lives. A good place to start is to realize that temptation, in itself, is not sin. Temptation by itself is simply the experience of being attracted to something or someone or being drawn to do something that we know to be wrong. Jesus was tempted by the devil, for example, to turn a stone into bread. Bread, of course, is good in itself, and Jesus surely was hungry after all those days without food. But he did not consent to that temptation; he didn't give in to what the devil was trying to entice him to do. Just as Jesus did not sin merely by experiencing that temptation, we do not sin when we merely experience being tempted in any way. Sin comes into the picture when we say 'yes' to that temptation, when we freely choose to give in and do what we know full well is wrong. Choosing to sin is our moral responsibility, one that we cannot shift to anyone else. And we need to forget the excuses, trying to blame someone else or pass the proverbial buck. "The devil made me do it"?? Please! That didn't work for Adam and Eve, and it doesn't work for us. The devil has no more power over us than we choose to give him. All he or anyone else can do is tempt us; if we freely choose to give in to that temptation, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

So what should we do in the face of temptation? First, simply acknowledge the fact: "you know, I'd really like to do that. I know it's not right, but I'd re-e-e-ally like to do that." Once we know we are being tempted to sin, then we go to God—we pray for help, for strength. And that's not just a pious little cliché ("of course Father is going to say we should pray...")—it's based on rock-solid truth. We need the grace of God to do anything good or worthwhile, and we surely need God's grace and strength to be able to resist temptations to sin and evil. With that help and grace from God, we really and truly can say 'no' to temptation. Several years ago there was a major national campaign aimed particularly at children and young people, encouraging them to "Just Say No" to drugs and alcohol. That was a worthwhile campaign; it gave them credit for being able to say 'no' to what was wrong. The same is true for any temptation that any of us face, no matter what our age may be. By the grace of God, we can truly say 'no' to what we know is wrong or harmful for us. We have the freedom and the capacity to reject temptations and to say 'no' to what we know is wrong.

One way to make it easier to say 'no' to sin and temptation is to not put ourselves in a situation where we know that we will be tempted in some way. In more traditional language, this is called 'avoiding the near occasion of sin'. Many of you learned one form of the Act of Contrition that refers specifically to this: "I firmly resolve with the help of thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen." The more often you go where you know you will be tempted, the more opportunities you will have to give in to those temptations. It's called "playing with fire"! At our parish council meeting Thursday night, when we were discussing this gospel, our council chairman (Milt Dakovich) put it this way: "If you get bit by a dog on a chain, don't blame the dog!" He said he heard that from Mother Angelica, but still: great line, Milt! The point is obvious: if you see a dog on a chain and you know it's dangerous, then you don't want to get too close. And if you do get too close and get bit, then whose fault is that??

Let's consider some more real-life examples. If you know you are tempted to overindulge in food or drink, it's probably not the best idea to go to a lot of all-you-can-eat buffets or keep a lot of beer or other alcohol around the house. If you know you are tempted by pornography, it's probably not the best idea to spend a whole lot of unnecessary time around the computer where that garbage is all too available—especially if you are alone. If you are tempted in any way to be unfaithful to your spouse, it's definitely a very bad idea to figure out ways to be or connect with that third person that you find so intriguing. Regarding that last example, in recent years there have been far too many examples of people in the public eye who learned that the hard way. (Yesterday)/On Friday, Tiger Woods made his public statement acknowledging his failure in this regard. Part of that statement gets precisely to what I'm talking about here:

“I stopped living by the core values that I was taught to believe in. I knew my actions were wrong, but I convinced myself that normal rules didn't apply...I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me...I was wrong. I was foolish. I don't get to play by different rules. The same boundaries that apply to everyone apply to me. I brought this shame on myself.”

We can and certainly should pray for Mr. Woods, his wife and family, and all others affected by his infidelity. His sorrow seems genuine; let's never forget that God's grace can and does accomplish marvels and miracles of conversion and healing and forgiveness. But his words illustrate very powerfully the harsh reality of sin and the fact that it comes from a freely-chosen consent, a saying 'yes' to temptation.

You know, there is some sense of truth in saying that by ourselves, we are powerless against sin and temptation. That's a fundamental point to all the 12-step programs—Alcoholics Anonymous and similar groups for those caught up in gambling, sex addictions, overeating and the like. The key phrase, of course, is 'by ourselves'. The reality, however, our great joy and blessing, is that we are in fact not by ourselves or dependent only on our own efforts—at least we don't have to be. We have God on our side; Jesus who in his humanity experienced very real temptation but who in his divinity was able to say 'no' to those temptations. His power, grace and example show us the way; they are our ticket to freedom from the slavery of sin. The Preface of today's Mass puts it this way: “By rejecting the devil's temptations [Jesus] has taught us to rid ourselves of the hidden corruption of evil.” In this sense, there actually is a silver lining to this cloud that is temptation. It has been said that ‘our temptations are moments of grace moving us to call on the name of the Lord in our powerlessness and weakness so that we will be saved.’ The fact that we struggle with temptation can simply open our eyes ever more to the fact that we need the grace of God, and we need it and can pray for it in a specific way to respond to whatever particular temptation happens to be present.

In his book “Jesus of Nazareth”, Pope Benedict XVI says: “At the heart of all temptations is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually... annoying, in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives.” Do we live for God—are we dedicated to him above all? Or do we in fact push him aside when we think his way is too hard or inconvenient or when we'd rather say 'yes' to temptations and indulge our lusts of whatever kind? Later in that same book the pope says: “God is the issue: Is he real,... or isn't he? Is he good, or do we have to invent the good ourselves? The God question is the fundamental question, and it sets us down right at the crossroads of human existence.” Lent is an especially graced and challenging time for each of us to grapple with just that question.