

1st SUNDAY OF LENT – C (March 6, 2022)

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we hear an account of Jesus' 40 days fasting in the desert and how the devil tempted him. We know that the devil failed in all his attempts, but did you catch the ominous detail at the very end of this gospel? Luke tells us that after his ineffective temptations, he departed from Jesus 'for a time'. The implication is clear: the devil would return, and indeed he did at the time of Jesus' arrest, suffering and death. Likewise, we experience temptation not just once in life; instead, it seems to be a regular part of our experience.

In fact, Jesus' experience is a consolation for us—it reminds us that being tempted in and of itself is not sin. Sin comes into being only when we freely consent to the temptation; that is when it becomes our responsibility. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews speaks to this consolation for us in declaring that Jesus' experience of being tested makes him "able to help those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:18). Also: "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one [i.e. Jesus] who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned" (Heb. 4:15). In no way does Jesus ever condemn us for the temptations we go through; instead, he desires to enfold us in his loving mercy and will do so if we would but ask.

We all know temptations of so many kinds—physical, emotional, moral among others. One way to summarize this universal experience is to say that there are two overall categories of temptation. The first is the temptation of pride: to think we are fully self-sufficient, that we don't need God or anyone else, and thus that I need to look out for myself above all else. That's what the devil tried on Jesus in the second of the three temptations in this gospel: "I'll give you all the power and the glory the world has to offer...if you just worship me." Of course the devil failed miserably in this pathetic attempt against Jesus...but we can easily fall for that lie if we begin to seek the world's approval rather than that of God. The second temptation, on the opposite end of the spectrum, is that of despair—"it's hopeless: no one can help me, not even God", or "I'm so bad and sinful that God can't possibly forgive me." Maybe we or a loved one is facing a really serious illness, or we mourn the death of a loved one, or we face a very tight financial bind, or we feel overwhelmed by guilt because of sins of the recent or distant past.

Let's remember some important basics regarding these two ends of the temptation spectrum—pride and despair. First of all, God is God, and we are not. Brief, to the point, easy to remember, and it would fit on a bumper sticker...and it's 100% true. We are all completely and totally dependent on God for our life, our very existence, our hope, joy, faith, and everything else that is of true worth. Whatever talents and abilities we have come ultimately from the God who made us, and so there is no basis at all for giving in to the temptation to think we are completely self-sufficient and therefore don't need to answer to anyone else, including God.

Second: this same God on who we depend for everything is also the perfection of boundless love who wants us to turn in faith and trust to him for everything. He wants nothing less than to shower us with an overabundance of his peace, grace and joy; but he won't do that against our will, if we don't ask him. Little children who know their parents love them don't hesitate for a moment to go to Mom or Dad for what they want or need; they know they will be taken care of

by those who love them unconditionally. Just so and so much more should we approach God in our needs, fears, and desperation.

This is true in our personal and family lives, and it's also true on the larger scale. Consider, for example, the war in the Ukraine that has captured the world's attention. The history of that nation and Russia is long and incredibly complicated, and those of us observing it from afar are stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place. On one hand, Russia and Vladimir Putin have done great evil in invading a sovereign nation and bringing death, destruction and exile to millions of innocent people. On the other hand, what can or should we do? Do we enter into war on the side of the Ukrainians? What would be the consequences of direct battle between the U.S. and Russia? It could very quickly become catastrophic for the entire world. I don't know what specific response we should make—military, political, or economic-- and I don't know that anyone else knows either. And so here comes that temptation once again to think we have to figure it all out, that it depends on us alone. Or...we can go to the opposite temptation extreme and think “there's no solution; this is hopeless; the end of the world is just around the corner.”

Better yet: let's remember that basic truth I mentioned before: God is God, and we are not. What seems impossible or hopeless for us is not at all impossible or hopeless for God. We all need to turn to God in our helplessness. Let's remember what Pope Francis said about the power of prayer and fasting that I mentioned last weekend. And he repeated himself in his Ash Wednesday homily: “Prayer, charity [almsgiving] and fasting are not medicines meant only for ourselves but for everyone: they can change history...[and] are the principal ways for God to intervene in our lives and in the world.”

So let's resist both those temptations of total self-sufficiency and despair by continuing our Lenten fasting and prayer that we began on Ash Wednesday for the cause of a just peace in the Ukraine and around the world. Let's go beyond the minimal fast and abstinence requirements the Church gives us, and let's do so in a spirit of generous love for those affected by this war. And let's deepen our prayer for these and all our other intentions. I particularly invite you to join us for the Stations of the Cross and Eucharistic adoration hours that we will have the next five Fridays of Lent at 5:30 pm in each of our cluster parishes; the details and schedule is in today's bulletin. This is in addition to the monthly Holy Hour on the second Tuesday which will be this coming Tuesday at Lourdes—again, see the bulletin for details.

In his book “Jesus of Nazareth”, Pope Benedict XVI said it so well: “The issue is the primacy of God...that he is the reality without which nothing else can be good. History cannot be detached from God and then run smoothly on purely material lines.” No, we are not entirely self-sufficient, but neither are we without hope—we have no reason for fear or despair. The devil can be sneaky at tempting us toward either of those lies, but he is indeed the father of lies. That's why we reject him. That's why we instead turn to the God of Jesus Christ for all we need and rightly desire. In faith and trust, let's make the offering to God of our prayer, our fasting, our charity...and let's see how the Lord will then once again change history in the ways that only he can.