

First Sunday of Lent: Temptation

The First Sunday of Lent always presents the temptation of the Lord. This is because the Lord fasted for 40 days, rebuffed the temptations of the devil and then began His public ministry. The number forty is used many times in the Bible, 146 to be exact, and represents a period of testing, trial, probation and preparation. At the time of Noah, it rained for forty days and forty nights as Noah was prepared to begin the human race anew. Moses lived forty years in Egypt being prepared to experience God in the Burning Bush. He spent forty nights on Mt. Sinai before receiving the Covenant of the Commandments, and then led the people for forty years through the desert until they were ready to receive the Promised Land. Elijah spent forty days traveling to Mt. Horeb, Sinai actually, being prepared to receive a message from God for a new world order. Jesus fasted for forty days, and then began his public ministry. After his death, resurrection and ascension the apostles spent forty days in prayer before they received the Holy Spirit.

And so we have the forty days of Lent. We spend forty days fasting, in self denial, forty days doing everything we can to come closer to God so we can make our baptisms, our sharing in the Easter Life of the Lord, a reality in the world.

Usually on this Sunday we hear about three different temptations the Lord endured: turn rocks into bread, demand that your Father work a miracle to save you, and trade His love for all the power of the world. We do not come upon these this year because they are in the *Gospels of Matthew and Luke*. Today's reading is from the *Gospel of Mark*. *Mark* just states that Jesus went into the desert for 40 days, was confronted with temptations, beat off the devil and then began his mission.

To prepare for Easter we spend forty days confronting temptation. I want to speak about temptations today. Sometimes people think that they must be very sinful because they have all sorts of temptations. People who are tempted are not sinful. They are alive. If any of us stops having temptations in our lives, we should check our pulse, we are probably dead.

Temptations are difficult to overcome. If they were easy to fight off, then there would be no sin in the world, and we would be living in Utopia. No, temptations are difficult. Every temptation contains elements of attractiveness, and has deep within it an aspect of goodness. Here is what I mean by that. All of God's creation contains beauty. However, we can pervert that beauty and turn something that is good into something that is bad. For example, the human body is beautiful; pornography is a perversion of this beauty. Another, example, there are wonderful medications to help people who suffer from anxiety attacks, depression, etc. The same medications can be used by some for the pleasure they bring, the euphoria for some, resulting in them destroying their lives as well as the lives of those around them. Pain medication is good. But seeking euphoria is bad. It has resulted in the opioid epidemic.

In the 17th chapter of the *Book of Revelation*, the visionary John is shown a

woman who was wearing purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. She was amazing to behold. But as the visionary looked he learned that she was drunk with the blood of saints and the martyrs of Jesus. She was seated on a huge beast that straddled seven hills. Rome was built on seven hills. The woman was pagan Rome with all its splendor and glory. It was marvelous. It had architecture, and sculptures and paintings. People were astounded at the glory that was Rome. But Rome was evil. Its beauty had been corrupted by evil. By the time of the Lord, Rome was a moral cess pool, the center of all that was wrong in the world.

All sin is attractive. If it were not attractive, we would not be tempted by it.

Some people live by the saying, "If it feels good, do it." What are they really saying? What they are saying is that anything is acceptable as long as they are getting pleasure from it. That is the way of the world. It is the way of selfishness, not the way of love. That is not the way of Jesus. Nor can it be our way.

Jesus is the conqueror of sin. But His battle was not a simple task. Jesus was tempted to save His own life, give up and not go along with the Father's plan. This plan would lead to His suffering and death. Why shouldn't he instead reject this and choose a life of riches? But Jesus' love for the Father and His love for us were more powerful than anything the devil or the world could muster up.

He beat off temptation, and then told us: "entrust your pain, your temptation and even your sin to me. I have conquered evil and will continue to conquer evil." We are told to fight temptation with the Lord. When we choose Christ, the devil really does not stand a chance. In the battle for the Kingdom, Jesus fights with us, finding a way for us to win. Our weakness becomes a source of our strength because it leads us to depend on the Lord. St. Paul recognized this and gave us a prayer that was the prayer of his life. This is Phillipians 4:13, "***I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.***"

God refuses to give up on us. Even when evil makes inroads into our lives. "See I have set my bow in the skies as a sign that I will never destroy my people." That was the promise made to seal the covenant with Noah after the flood. The bow, by the way, is the rainbow. For people of faith, the rainbow is not just a beautiful natural occurrence. It is a sign of our hope in God. Think of the bow as being God's bow with his arrows ready to shoot devastation upon the world. But God has hung up his bow. He has fastened it to the sky. He is not going to destroy us for our sins if we are willing to let Him help us overcome sin. When we are overwhelmed with our own human weakness, our own continual sinfulness, the rainbow reminds us: God refuses to give up on us. We cannot give up on ourselves. Look at the rainbow. God is the Compassionate, the Merciful One.

The 40 days of Lent are really about loving Jesus. We spend this time looking for ways to grow in our love for our Savior. We fight off temptation with Him. We give

Him our sins in confession. We unite ourselves to Him through the Eucharist and many other method of praying. We do everything possible to allow His grace into our lives. In 2 Corinthians 12:9 Paul is told, and we are told, "*My grace is enough for you.*" With Jesus as the center of our lives, nothing that the world throws at us will defeat us. He is the conqueror of temptation. He is the Victor over sin.

We are His.

And He is ours.