

First Sun Lent – Cycle A, 2008

Here we are, on the 1st Sunday of Lent, and as always we hear the familiar story of how Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days in the desert, and how He was tempted by the devil... Somehow we're supposed to connect this with our own Lenten practice of fasting and prayer... Now come on, have any of us ever gone 40 days without eating?... I have trouble going 40 minutes... And what about that strange assortment of temptations Jesus experienced?... Do they bear any resemblance to the ordinary temptations we face every day? ... Any of you ever been tempted to risk your life jumping off a tall building expecting that God would send an angel to parachute you gently to the ground?... I get dizzy standing on a chair to change a light bulb. ... So, since there are no apparent connections between what happened to Jesus in the desert and our own lives, do we just let this Gospel story go in one ear and out the other with no impact on us at all? ... Of course not!... We need to look beneath the particulars of this story to see that there is a link between what Jesus experienced in that desert and our human experience. We can see in Jesus' spiritual battle with Satan, the same struggle every one of us has to face. And that is the temptation to be less than the child of God we were created to be – the temptation to take the easy way and not God's way.

Today's Gospel scene takes place right after Jesus had been baptized by John, anointed by the Holy Spirit and heard the voice of God thundering, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased." With those words echoing in His ears, Jesus was ready to begin His mission as the Son of God, ... and He is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert to fast and to pray and to discern what that mission was to be, ... what was the Father's plan for Him... It is there in that desert that Jesus – starving, exhausted, in no condition to offer any resistance - was tempted to reject God's plan and take the easy path to glory.... The words of the tempter were very enticing : "Come on, Jesus, ... you want to hear the cheers of that mob down there, don't you? Maybe get high fives from the Scribes and Pharisees... Well, here's your chance. Show them who you are... Throw yourself down from the top of this temple... Show them that God will send His angels to keep you from getting hurt... because you are the Son of God." ... And when Jesus didn't give in, Satan didn't give up: "Come on, Son of God, you want to rule the world, don't you?... That's why you're here, isn't it... to proclaim a kingdom where you are king. Right?... Well, I'll make it easy for you... Bow down and worship me, and I'll turn it all over to you... I won't get in your way." ... Again, Jesus didn't give in.

Jesus refused to give in to the temptation to take the easy way... He knew who He was and who He belonged to... He knew the mission God was offering Him was a hard one, with its challenges, its rejections, its betrayals, and its suffering... But He accepted it because He loved and trusted the one who was offering it... He refused to be less than who He was – the Son of God... My friends, we are Christians ... baptized into Christ... we are children of God, ... we belong to God, ... we are created in God's image. ... To be made in God's image, is to have the same loving, caring, generous, forgiving nature as our God ... This is how we were created to be, ... But like Jesus we struggle with the temptation to be less than what God created us to be... Unlike Jesus, though, we often forget who we are and who we belong to. ... It's when we forget who we are and whose we are, that we fall to temptation... and do things we know are wrong... We know they're wrong, ... yet we still do them... It's like a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip I once saw where Calvin is wearing a safari hat and says to his dad, "So long, Pop. I'm off to check my tiger trap. ... I rigged a tuna fish sandwich yesterday, so I'm sure I caught a tiger by now!" ... His dad replies, "They like tuna fish, huh?" ... Calvin walks off saying, "Tigers will do anything for a tuna fish sandwich." ... The final frame shows Hobbes, the tiger, hanging by his foot from a tree, munching on a tuna fish sandwich, saying to no one in particular, " We're kinda stupid that way."

Yep, we're kinda stupid that way...I know I am...I think you know what I mean....Despite the fact that we know it's wrong...that it is not what God wants us to do... Despite the fact that we know we shouldn't... Despite the fact we know we're going to regret it, ...we still give into temptation. We sin. ..

-We know we shouldn't cheat on our taxes....-We know we shouldn't cheat on that exam -We know we shouldn't flirt with that cute person in the office...-We know we shouldn't listen to that kind of music...We know we shouldn't go to that porn website or cable channel...We know we shouldn't pad that cost estimate...-We know we shouldn't judge a whole race or religion by the actions of a few ...We know we shouldn't take that drink....We know we shouldn't tell that lie. ...We know we shouldn't be having sex...We know.We know,...yet we still do it...Why? Because temptation always makes a bad thing look good...The power of all temptation is that it can make me believe that I will be more happy if I do the thing that I know I shouldn't do, than I would be if I resist the temptation and not do it...And that's how it's been ever since Adam and Eve were duped into believing they would be much happier if they disobeyed God and ate the fruit from that tree...Of course, they found out what we find out every time we fall to temptation: **IT ALMOST ALWAYS ENDS UP BAD**...Oh, it might make us happier for a while, it might bring us pleasure for a while,...but eventually, eventually it bites us in the butt...doesn't it?

I don't know about you but when I give in to temptation, sometimes it makes me feel like I'm the "scum of the earth." I get mad at myself for being so weak, for being so stupid...Of course that's how Satan wants us to feel: -He wants us to feel like dirt...-He wants us to feel like losers...He wants us to feel so badly about ourselves that we pull away from Jesus....because after what we've done, we don't deserve His love...we don't deserve His forgiveness...And that's the worst thing we can do – sever our relationship with Jesus ...Sure, I messed up, I sinned...But that won't make Jesus love me any less...I only have to look at Him on that cross to know that...to know that His love NEVER CHANGES...Like my favorite song from Steubenville says: HIS LOVE IS "UNCHANGING, UNCHANGING." ... You know, Satan doesn't want us to be close to Jesus, ...doesn't want us to have a personal relationship with Jesus....because if we stay close to Jesus, ... then we'll call on Him when we're faced with temptations...We'll lean on Him for the strength and the willpower to resist... If we stay close to Jesus, we'll be able to hear Him warning us away from those places - those situations - where we might be lured into sin...He'll be like old Doc Campbell on the TV show *Hee Haw*, who had a patient come in and tell him, "Doc, I broke my arm in two places,"...And old doc replied, "Well then, stay outta them places!"...If we stay close to Jesus, then we'll listen when He says, "Stay outta them places!"

Still, there are going to be temptations we can't avoid... The 1st Letter of Peter warns us with this image: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1Pet 5:8-9)...And sometimes we are going to give in because "we're kinda stupid that way." ...That's why we need to remember the story of Jesus in the desert. Remember that we have a savior who was tempted as we are, who understands our struggles....who knows how hard it is to stay true to who we are and whose we are...And that's why we really need to get *into* Lent, not just get *through* Lent...Get *into* Lent. ...Use this Lent to draw closer to Jesus...Pray more, Read and reflect on the Gospels. Do some spiritual reading...Maybe join a faith-sharing group...Make Him our constant companion as we navigate thru this mine-field called "life."...If we use this Lent to work hard on strengthening our relationship with Jesus Christ, we can turn that roaring Lion into a little old pussycat... Let's make this Lent a lot more than just giving up M&Ms and ice cream...OK? AMEN.