

1st Sunday of Lent Year “B”

February 22, 2015/ Cathedral of Saint Paul

Readings: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

The Gospel on the 1st Sunday of Lent centers upon the temptation of Christ- in all three cycles of readings. Temptation is crafty, and comes around in the most unlikely ways. I recall an early episode in my life. I just had to go and try it. I trusted my mother implicitly, she would neither lie to me nor lead me astray. She warned me clearly that winter well over 40 years ago, but, I still wondered.... Would my tongue **really** freeze onto the metal door? I am happy to report that my curiosity was satisfied and my stupidity rewarded.

I think the temptation seemed too much for me. I am not implying that the devil ‘made me do it’, for it was clearly of my own free will! Yet, there is no denying the force of temptation in our lives, and yes, some of it does come from outside of us. A good starting point may be the reality of evil. Do we see it in the world? The answer to this is painfully obvious—we see it all the time, and we even see it in ourselves at times. From where does this evil come?

Ultimately it comes from an abuse of our own free will. God cannot create an evil person, but he did give to us the tremendous gift of our freedom. How we use or abuse that gift forms the basis of our relationship with God. Sin entered the world through our first parents—this is the constant witness of Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. As *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy. [Cf. Gen 3:1-5; Wis 2:24] Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called "Satan" or the "devil". [Cf. Jn 8:44; Rev 12:9]¹

¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Para. #391.

Because we are irrevocably linked with humanity through the human nature that we share— as creatures, we too were affected by this primordial act of free will, this tragic choice. The existence of evil is the proverbial ‘no-brainer’. The existence of the devil is mentioned hundreds of times in the Scriptures, and repeatedly throughout the Church’s Tradition. However, the movement from admitting the existence of evil in a general sense to a belief that this evil could be a **being**, a creature—this is much more difficult for some to see. Innocuous cartoon images do not help.

The Church’s task in ministering to God’s people is not to scare them into belief, but it is most certainly to share with them the saving message of Christ. And from what or from whom was Christ saving us? From ourselves? No, God sent his only Son to save us from our bondage to evil. The trouble is, we want to localize it, and it is not that simple. It is no accident that this bothered St. Augustine for years before his conversion: “I sought the source of evil, and I found no explanation.”²

As powerful as the tug towards evil can be, we must never despair. The power of evil is not absolute. Evil is a tremendous mystery, because God could have chosen to protect us from all evil, not allowing us to fall into sin. We are in desperate need of a balanced understanding of the reality of evil in our lives and in the world.

Thus, while it is naive to say that every sin is directly due to diabolical action, still as Blessed Pope Paul VI reminded us in a 1972 General Audience, “it is true that those who do not keep watch over themselves with a certain moral rigor are exposed to the influence of the ‘mystery of iniquity’ cited by St. Paul which raises serious questions about our salvation.”³

² Saint Augustine, *Confessions VII, 5, 7, 11 etc.*

³ Pope Paul VI, “Confronting the Devil’s power” 15 November 1972

Perhaps it is sufficient to see his existence in the denial of evil and sin in our society. The very denial of the obvious shows forth the evil one's influence.

The account in this morning's Gospel is proof that Jesus underwent all that we experience as pilgrims on the way. He was not immune to the temptations that can keep us in bondage to sin, be it a temptation to despair if our studies are a source of struggle or frustration, or the temptation to want to exercise too much control over own futures. He did not succumb, and his valiant witness provides us the strength and resolve to continue for another day.

As bearers of God's manifold kindness, our **patience** with the faults of others becomes a conduit of Christ's love. As **people of hope**, we help to stem the tide that some may feel towards despair, when on the surface, they are overwhelmed. As **witnesses of faith**, we tirelessly proclaim the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and pray that **we will be faithful signs of a love** that is more powerful than temptation, more lasting than immediate gratification, and ultimately more joyous than could be possibly imagined.