

1 L,17a

The journey of Lent has begun. With the smudging of ashes on our foreheads this past Wednesday, consciously or unconsciously, we have stated that through the bumps and grinds of life we wish to follow the One who goes before us to the cross.

With regards to Jesus and His temptations, from the safety of the heavily populated region of Jerusalem, Jesus is cast into the wilderness, into a place of danger. In biblical literature, the desert was considered to be a school room where we learn the truth about ourselves.

At this point, it is almost as if Satan is asking Jesus: Just what is this Jesus project all about? He wonders:

Will there be cheating?

Is the Son of God really going to suffer?

Or is Jesus going to bail at the first sign of trouble?

Well the temptations of Jesus proved at least one thing—and that is: Jesus' love for us was so strong that he was prepared to suffer and to die on the cross for us. This is so amazing that it is difficult to wrap our minds around the depth of that kind of love. Now a loving parent may be willing to give up his or her life for a much beloved child; but Jesus gave up his life for the likes of Hitler and Stalin and their ilk as well as for each one of us—for the loving and unloving among us.

And so today's gospel episode invites our own reflection upon the manner with which each of us will deal with temptations in our own lives.

But for us to successfully confront our own temptations, we must first name the temptation.

Be morally explicit and identify evil in particular rather than in general terms.

Naming the temptations that we face make it utterly real and sharpens our attempt to focus and to fix the situation. It is important to realize that all temptations come to us under the guise of some kind of goodness; for instance, no sane person chooses evil unless some positive benefit is seen to come from it (repeat). For instance, it doesn't matter that I cheat on my income taxes because the government wants too much of my money.

Secondly, we need to name the tempter: this unmask any delusion we try to hide behind and helps to deflate our attempts to rationalize the sin, as in: I had to embezzle money from work in order to pay for my rent. We might ask: Whose fault is it that you can't pay your rent?

Thirdly, we need to practice resistance.

Moral training, like any other form of athletic or musical training, takes discipline to acquire.

And finally, we need to call for help; relying on our own resources alone is a recipe for disaster.

Don't we all, at some point, need a friend or someone, to tell us what we don't want to hear? Telling us: What were you thinking? Or, you're just being stubborn. Regardless of our relationship to them, whether we like to admit it or not, we owe them our gratitude, no matter how much we may resent hearing the truth. And no matter how confident we were at the start of our journey, sooner or later, almost everyone experiences that uncomfortable feeling that we are now lost.

And when that happens, it may be easy to turn things around with just a few corrected turns or we may have to back track quite a distance. In any event, we need to start getting "unlost." Or, as the little gps unites are so fond of saying: recalculate (2 times).

Rather than looking upon temptation as a sort of “playing with evil,” we should follow Jesus’ lead & regard the experience of temptation as a time & a place in which to meet and lean upon God.

This continuing struggle to choose between good and evil, between God and self, between self and others can be a graced and positive experience

We are challenged to accept, endure and emerge from the experience of temptation as changed people, humbler but stronger and more deeply aware of the presence and the power of God in our every thought, word and action.

But first, we need to see the lie for what it is: a lie. And that happens when we started to believe our own press releases; believe our own rationalizations for our actions.

In this life it is impossible to escape the assault of temptation, but one thing is sure: temptations are not in our lives in order to make us fail. They can strengthen our resolve to live in Jesus’ shadow; consequently they are not meant for our ruin, but for our good. They are experiences from which we emerge better able to face the challenges of life.

For example, suppose a boy is doing really well on the second string of his school’s football team; the coach will certainly not send him out to play with the third string, where he wouldn’t be challenged; rather, he will send him out to be with the varsity squad where his skills will certainly be tested.

It’s easy to understand the idea that humans need to get ready before meeting God,
but it takes some effort for us to grasp the idea that God needed to get ready in order to serve us.

Today's gospel teaches that Jesus needed preparation for his ministry; Jesus went to the empty desert and stripped down to bare necessities so he could discover what is absolutely essential.

Our Lord's parched being walks out of the arid desert after 40 days of fasting, while facing the wiles of the Devil.

He then makes his way to the dimpled hills of Galilee to begin his public ministry, but not without a tinge of sadness.

Mark begins the story of Jesus with these words: After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

While our Lord was wrestling with Satan in the lonely expanse of the desert, John the Baptist faced his own wilderness, chained to the cold walls of Herod's dungeon.

John, the burly preacher dressed in camel's hair, wastes away, a pawn in Herod's hands.

And so here we are, at the beginning of our Lenten journey, witnessing Jesus' struggle with the devil and John's imprisonment.

And so what is God saying to us?

For starters, I hear God saying that life always includes the reality of suffering.

When ashes are imposed on our foreheads, we hear again those haunting words: remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Our lives invite disappointment even disillusionment if we entertain the idea that difficulty, struggle, and suffering are not woven into the fabric of living.

The question Lent raises is not “will suffering come,” but rather “how will I choose to embrace the suffering that comes with the often messy reality of my day to day living?”

As I’ve mentioned in the past, I knew a woman who replaced the crucifix over her bed with pictures of her grandchildren when it became clear that God wasn’t healing her cancer.

As scripture scholar Charles Barkley put it: real faith is total trust; it is not “doubt looking for proof.”

This leaves me with the question: Will I choose hope or despair, cynicism or faith in life’s challenges?

It is for us to walk with our Lord through the days of Lent so that we can better accept suffering as part of life’s reality.

And in so doing, we embrace suffering, even to the point of death, with unflinching, unwavering, uncommon hope in God’s promise of life now and evermore.

3. Furthermore, God reminds us that the good news is always God’s last word

This holy season summons us to face with faith the suffering of our Lord and our own life’s struggles, but with a sense of hope and faith.

For this to happen, we must first repent, to literally change our lifestyles.

Many people become desperately sorry because of the mess that sin has gotten them into, but they know very well that, if they could be reasonably sure that they could escape the consequences of their sin, they would do the same thing all over again; is not the sin that they regret—but the consequences of their sin.

But real repentance means not only to be sorry for the consequences of sin, but to hate the sin itself.

And so Lent challenges us to dig deeply into the silence of our souls, to rediscover what it means to be a person of faith.

What values we want our lives to stand for.

The way of the Father is the only way that will lead us to the life that never ends and where all tears will be wiped away.

And this is the path we want our lives to take on our own journey towards Easter Resurrection!