

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday Lent 2016  
Year C: Luke 4:1-13  
Extraordinary Form: Matthew 4:1-11

The Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke testify to the 40 days Jesus fasted in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry. They chronicle the temptations Jesus endured.

Satan tempted Jesus to turn stone into bread.

[L] Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would only adore Satan.

[L] Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and dared him to jump, that Angels would catch him.

And we hear how Jesus, even though hungry, was bolstered by Holy Scripture to persevere, resist, remain clear-sighted and stay faithful to the Lord, our God.

Now this is our season of 40 days when we are called to prepare ourselves for the paschal mystery through prayer, fasting, almsgiving and fuller participation in the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation.

Here I am preaching to the choir. As I look out there, I see folks who pray and give and celebrate the sacraments year-round. Yet, have we settled into a routine?

Lent is our opportunity to change that routine, to take on a different rhythm, to shake up our lives a bit. Sometimes our lives need to be shaken up a bit so that the Lord can get in edgewise. The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus pushing people's buttons. Jesus wasn't being rude; he was just trying to get in.

**Pray this Lent.** Well, you have been praying. And it has been good prayer. I am not asking you to abandon your good prayer routine of these past months.

When is the last time you remember hearing God? What did he say to you? Well of course we can't hear God's voice the way we hear each other's. This kind of hearing takes...listening. Listening is more demanding than talking. Listening demands time.

During Lent, can we find that holy piece of time when we allow God to speak to us? Can you find a prayer place without distraction or interruption?

There are prayer styles that lend themselves to listening. In the narthex we have little daily devotional books that introduce us to reflective reading.

Most of the individual books of the New Testament are short enough to be read at one or two sittings. If you can find the quiet time to read one of the Gospels start to finish, I bet God has something very important to share with you.

**Fast and Abstain this Lent.** Sometimes I think it would be easier to remember meatless Fridays if it was every Friday of the year like in the old days. Of course, that may be the point. I might be able to be more “observant” if I could dedicate the practice to a routine, but would I be able to “observe” God better because of it?

One of the reasons that Vatican II changed our Friday meatless practices was that it was vulnerable to the merely routine. Fridays are the memorial days of Good Friday and call for a penitential spirit. True penance can be easily lost in routine. Vatican II called for us to develop our own individual penitential practices for every Friday in memory of Jesus’ loving offering on that Good Friday.

I also offer an explanation of fasting by Fr. Thomas Ryan.

“Fasting as a religious act increases our sensibility to that mystery always and everywhere present to us ... It is an invitation to awareness, a call to compassion for the needy, a cry of distress and a song of joy. It is a discipline of self-restraint, a ritual of purification, and a sanctuary for offerings of atonement. It is a wellspring for the spiritually dry, a compass for the spiritually lost and inner nourishment for the spiritually hungry.”<sup>1</sup>

**Give alms this Lent.** Well, you folks give year-round. Look around you. Your contributions keep this place beautiful and in operation. And we are not the only recipients of your generosity.

I give too, but somehow, I’ve always felt guilty about not giving more. However, I found that electronic giving helped me give more. I programmed my PC to send out my charity checks the day after every payday. In fact, it is almost **painless**. I can hardly even **sense** that I am giving. [repeat] I can hardly **sense** that I am giving.

Well, that looks like I’ve successfully gutted the spirit out of those alms. So how do I allow the Spirit back into my sharing? How do I allow my sharing to create relationships with those in need?

Could I show up at one of those charities that receive my computer-generated checks? Could I become more knowledgeable of their mission and spread the word to others? If I were to sit and listen to God some, I bet he would have some suggestions up his sleeve.

It is in almsgiving that we connect with the one who has given us all. We imitate him in giving to each other.

These Lenten disciplines have the power to open ourselves to God’s graces. When temptations come, as they will, just as they came to Jesus, maybe, through the discipline of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we will be prepared to resist with God’s help.

When was the last time you were tempted? I might mention that midnight snack, but what I'm really talking about is that good ol' in-the-wilderness-being-tempted stuff.

The truth is I may not be really aware of my last big temptation. My routine may have left me a little **numb** to those spiritual challenges. I might have called a truce with my temptations, a kind of spiritual co-existence. Don't bother me too much and I won't have to address you too much.

C.S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* addressed this. These comical letters are from the fictional character Screwtape, who is a commander in Satan's legion, to his rookie tempter nephew, Wormwood. C.S. Lewis, with tongue in cheek, tries to illuminate God's goodness through the impaired eyes of the evil one. As I read part of one of these letters remember that when I read a reference to the "Enemy" that is really the diabolic Screwtape referring to our Blessed Father.

Uncle Screwtape is writing to Wormwood about his nephew's newest target, a man, referred to as the "patient", who has recently embraced Christianity. Wormwood has not given up trying to devour the man's soul for Satan. In fact, on the heels of the patient's new found Christianity, Wormwood has introduced some very exciting, if naughty, people into the patient's life.

"My dear Wormwood,

Obviously, you are making excellent progress. My only fear is lest in attempting to hurry the patient you awaken him to a sense of his real position. For you and I, who see that position as it really is, must never forget how totally different it ought to appear to him. We know that we have introduced a change of direction in his course which is already carrying him out of his orbit around the Enemy; but he must be made to imagine that all the choices which have effected this change of course are trivial and revocable. He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.

For this reason, I am almost glad to hear that he is still a churchgoer and a communicant. I know there are dangers in this; but anything is better than he should realize the break he has made with the first months of his Christian life. As long as he retains externally the habits of a Christian, he can still be made to think of himself as one who has adopted a few new friends and amusements but whose spiritual state is much the same as it was six weeks ago. And while he thinks that, we do not have to contend with the explicit repentance of a definite, fully recognized sin, but only with his vague, though uneasy, feeling that he hasn't been doing very well lately.

This dim uneasiness needs careful handling. If it gets too strong it may wake him up and spoil the whole game.<sup>2</sup>

Where is it that I can go where I can wake up and confront my temptations and sins clearly? Right over there, in the confessional with Father.

I don't know why it is so hard to prepare myself for confession. I always feel so better afterwards.

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation leaves no room for the play of the likes of Screwtape and Wormwood. It is there that I am filled with God's grace, as I am filled with his grace every time I come to his supper.

So, listen, choir, this Lent isn't so much about you not being good enough, it is about you finding ways to allow the one who **is** good into the very fabric of your being.

Can you shake it up a bit? Can you allow him into the spaces?

Allow Jesus to guide you as you join him in our Lenten journey, headed towards his Paschal mystery. Walk with Jesus.

1. The Sacred Art of Fasting, Thomas Ryan CSP, pp x-xi
2. The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis, chapter 12, pp 1-2