Welcome to the first Sunday of Lent. As Catholics, we know Lent is a season of repentance and renewal, a time for us to deepen our spiritual lives through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

This season calls us to more than a superficial, temporary change. We are called to a “metanoia,” a Greek word that means, “a conversion of the heart.” This is a call for us to become more God-focused and less self-focused.

But we are so often unsettled by the noise of distractions, aren’t we? Unsettling local news reports shake and disappoint us; the Corona virus threatens global health and well-being; precipitous stock market declines spawn financial fears and worries; yet another workplace shooting shocks our consciences; and I won’t even begin to discuss the current level of our political discourse.

If these things were the sum total of our lives, we’d have to ask, “How can this Lent be a season of renewal?” But, thanks be to God, this is not what our lives are meant to be about. The noise of distractions that we experience call us, all the more urgently, to find a place to escape, a place where we can commune more deeply with God. We are called to go out into the desert, to meet with God and overcome those temptations that distract us.

In today’s gospel, Jesus, just after having been baptized by John and being announced as God’s “beloved Son,” needed to remove himself from the noise of distractions to prepare for His mission in the world. While we are told that Jesus was, “led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil,” he did not engage in this combat unprepared.

Jesus sought deep communion with his Father, fasting for the symbolic ‘forty days and forty nights’. While we might fixate on the physical discomfort of this, one scholar I read proffers that Jesus fast was a by-product of his communion with God.

Jesus was so deeply in relationship with the Father that nothing else occurred to him. The writer opined, “Jesus was not aware of hunger during his time of communion with his Father but afterwards noticed that he was hungry.”

That was the point the tempter cunningly awaited.

Just as our temptations can start as small things that grow over time, the devil started with a small temptation for Jesus. And he started when Jesus was physically weak from His fast.

The devil did more than just tempt Jesus: he taunted him. He used the very title that God pronounced at Jesus’ baptism, saying, “If you are the ‘Son of God,’ command that these stones become loaves of bread.”

Although Jesus eventually fed 5,000 people with a few loaves during his ministry, he would not engage in a self-serving miracle as the devil tempted him to do. As the Son of God, Jesus trusted completely that the Father would provide him with whatever he needed.
He rejected the devil’s temptation citing the scripture, ‘man does not live by bread alone.’ Jesus did not allow his physical hunger to dominate over his spiritual hunger for communion with God.

How well do we control our desires for good and pleasurable things like food and drink? Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are the only two days each year that the Church requires Catholics to fast.

How well do we use these opportunities to get closer to God, to enter into that deep communion that Jesus shared with his Father? Let us pray that this Lent we will experience “metanoia”—that conversion of the heart—that will help us connect with God by mastering our physical desires.

Having failed in his first attempt, the devil upped the ante by offering Jesus high honor. Again he began with the taunt, “If you are the Son of God,” and then quoted scripture to entice Jesus to throw himself off the highest point in the Temple to the surface below.

This would certainly been a fatal leap for any mere human. If Jesus jumped and landed without a scratch, everyone would have been awestruck. In modern terms, this feat would have made Jesus a “rock star”, earning praise and places of honor wherever he went.

In this temptation, the devil offered Jesus unbounded prestige. Again, Jesus refused, quoting the scripture that says, “You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.”

Strike two for the devil.

Jesus refused to put a human desire for honor above his relationship with God.

How do any of us respond when we are tempted to assume positions of honor or prestige?

Do we jump at the chance for adulation, or do we take that lower place at the banquet? Let us pray that this Lent we will experience “metanoia”—that conversion of the heart—that helps put God first, above honor, prestige, or popularity.

Having failed twice, the devil pulled out his next temptation, one of the most attractive of all: POWER! If Jesus would renounce His divine sonship and worship the devil, He was promised power over all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus refused the offer of power, and proved that he already had all the power he needed when he said, “Get away, Satan!” And then, Satan left. And with that, God’s angels ministered to Jesus.

How well do we subordinate a desire for personal power to a desire for closeness with God? Let us pray that this Lent we will experience “metanoia”—that conversion of the heart—that will help us connect with God by disconnecting from a desire for undue power.

Pleasure, honor, power and money--the things that the devil used to tempt Jesus--are the same things he uses to tempt all of us. These are all good things, in and of themselves. But when we let them get between us and God, when we let them take first place away from God, they can be spiritually fatal.
In the heat of battle, in the middle of our everyday lives, it is often hard to see these temptations for what they really are.

So, during this season of Lent, let’s commit to making the time to find our way out into the desert so we can enter into that deeper communion with the Father as Jesus did.

Let us escape the noise of distraction so that we can experience metanoia, that transformational conversion of the heart, in the deepest way possible.