

The first Sunday of Lent always contains a gospel that describes Jesus being tempted by Satan in the desert. It's a good way to begin Lent, since Lent's a time to reflect on the enduring reality that our happiness flows from God's loving kindness alone, and how we can sometimes be tempted to believe it's some other way.

Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn't supply any details about the temptations Jesus experienced. On a retreat several years ago, a bunch of us asked our retreat director about that. He told us that Matthew and Luke had other agendas and suggested that Mark left supplying the details to us for a reason. If Jesus was like us in every way except sin, then the temptations he suffered had to be like those we all face day-to-day. What was it like for Jesus? Well, Mark says, go look and see what it's like for you.

Then our retreat director left us for a bit, explaining that he had to work on his homily for the next day. Before he left, he asked us to spend some time together and exchange stories about our own experiences with temptation without, of course, revealing anything too personal.

We told him we thought that was a pretty good idea, but the silence that followed after he left pointed to the reality that none of us really thought it was a good idea at all. I recalled at the time having learned in my chaplain training that men are not particularly keen on self-revealing conversation, especially if the needle starts to go into the red zone. Slowly though, we began to share our experiences with temptation. It was pretty clear from postures and body language that more was being withheld than was being said.

When it was my turn to share something, I mentioned a temptation prayer that had been given to me by a friend a while ago. It goes like this: 'Thank you, God, for protecting me

from what I thought I wanted, and blessing me with what I didn't know I needed'.<sup>1</sup>  
Grunts and nods told me the prayer made sense to others, too.

More comments followed, all of which converged on the truth that God is always good, sin is always a lie, and temptation's always an urge to believe what's simply not true. We all agreed that amazingly, or perhaps not so amazingly, we sometimes try to convince ourselves that something we know is evil is actually good, with unfortunate consequences. One of the guys told us that Mark Twain's friend, Artemus Ward, had accurately described this phenomenon a century or so ago when he said: "It ain't what we don't know that gets us into trouble. It's what we think we know that just ain't so."

Then one of the younger guys asked, "You older guys have been around the block a couple of times. You say you know that something's bad, but how do you really know? Can you tell me more about what it's like for you to experience temptation?"

We thought about that for a bit, and then one of the folks said he thought the best way to describe his own experience was through the lyrics of song he'd heard a while back called "I Feel a Sin Comin' On." It began like this:

I feel a sin comin' on / I feel a right that's about to go wrong  
I got a shiver down to the bone/I feel a sin comin' on<sup>1</sup>

"That's how I can tell," he said. "Something inside me knows what's right and what's wrong, and it tells me. Listen to your conscience. It won't lie."

At that point our retreat director rejoined us, holding a paper that we learned over dinner was the first draft of his homily. He listened to that last part of our discussion and said: "That's amazing, and so good to hear. What you just said is exactly what the Church teaches. Let me read you something from a wonderful document called *Lumen Gentium*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/pistolannies/ifeelasincominon.html>, January 31, 2021

that I'm planning to use in my homily for you. It reflects what you just said and reads like this: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths."<sup>2</sup> "Gentlemen," our retreat director said, "that law that's been written in our hearts which cannot be ignored or contradicted is called the Law of Love. God put it in each of us, while simultaneously giving us the freedom to follow it or not."

"Who needs freedom like that?" our young friend asked.

"Love always has to be a free choice," our retreat director said, "and it's a choice everyone has to make. The fact that it was the Holy Spirit who drove him into the desert tells us it was that way for Jesus and it's that way for us, too. God finds ways to let us know when we're crossing the line, as some of you have observed, but God will never force us to love. It simply can't be done. Has anyone ever forced you to hug your family, kiss your wife or receive communion?" We all chuckled at the thought. "It's like that," he continued. "Love is the deepest reality at the heart of human existence, but you have to choose to live out of that reality within you. Temptation fundamentally tries to tell us that's not so, encouraging us to believe the lie that pleasure, possessions or something else, always directed at ourselves and our own will, is more real. When your body tells you there's a sin comin' on, listen. Then ask – no, *pray* - what's the loving thing to do here, Jesus? What's about God and the kind, loving service of others and what's just about me? Look deep inside, where God lives within you. You can know that life is all about love. Don't let temptation fool you into believing that it's any other way."

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), Paragraph 16