

# First Sunday of Lent

## A Season of Joy?

Welcome to Lent!

A friend of mine recently told me that Lent is her most un-favorite season in the Church's year. "Why?" I asked, leading with my chin. "It's so darn gloomy," she answered, "it's forty days of misery! "The drab vestments, all the talk about temptation and sin, giving up things we enjoy, going to confession...it's just depressing."

Well, I'm here to say that I like Lent. But more than that, I'm out to convince you that Lent is not about gloom and doom. In its own way, it is a season of joy. It's not the giddiness we'd feel had we won the lottery nor is it the contentment we experience when we share a meal with family or friends...good as that is. Rather, the joy of Lent is more like the deep happiness we feel when we are able to make a new beginning in our lives... let's say when our boss gives us another chance to succeed, or when a good friend whom we offended truly forgives us, or when we manage to survive a serious illness. Lent give us a new lease on life, our life, together, in Christ.

And this new lease on life brings us joy, neither giddiness nor mere contentment, but a serious joy, a joy in the depth of our souls, a joy that answers our deepest longing to be loved by God and to love him in return with a love that spills over into our relationship with families, our friends, our co-workers, and even our enemies. Here we are talking not about a joy that comes and goes but a sturdy joy that can be ours at every moment of our lives, even the worst moments, and at the hour of our death. Such joy does not come to us easily.

## "Exhibit A"

To illustrate my point, I offer you Exhibit A:

Today's short reading from the Gospel of St. Mark, the Cliffsnote version of Jesus' encounter with the devil in the desert. Unlike the other Gospels, Mark doesn't tell us

how the devil tempted Jesus or what Jesus said to the devil in reply. He does tell us that immediately after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit prodded Jesus to go into the wilderness for forty days, where he was tempted by the devil and lived among wild beasts. The Gospel of Mark doesn't even give us the benefit of Jesus' slam-dunk response to Satan's temptations... he just implies that Jesus was protected from all harm by the angels who came to minister to him.

It's all rather stark.

Where do we find encouragement in this Gospel passage? What makes me say that it is "Exhibit A" in my making the case that Lent is a season of serious joy? Just a few points come to mind.

## **The Serious Joy Found in Christ's Temptations**

First, the fact that God the Father wanted his Son Jesus to become one of us so that he could be tempted the way we are. Doesn't that tell us that God really loves us? The Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: "...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness but one who was similarly tested in every way, yet never sinned" (Heb. 4:15). Pope Francis often reminds us that Jesus loves us that he is at our side whenever we are tempted or discouraged.

A second source of Lenten joy is the knowledge that Jesus prevailed over Satan's temptations. The Father sent his angels to guard Jesus in every way (see Psalm 9:11). Yet, we might be thinking, "Of course, Jesus defeated Satan. He's the Son of God!" But let's not forget Jesus also shares our humanity and it was against Jesus' humanity that Satan's temptations were directed. The message of Lent is not that we have to prevail over temptations by our own strength, by engaging in stringent penitential practices. No, the message of Lent is that if we open our hearts to the Lord we too will share in his victory over temptation, sin, and even death. St. Peter said as much in today's second reading: "Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God..." (1 Peter 3:18). So in Lent we confess our sins, we pray, we fast, we serve the needs of the poor not to earn our salvation but rather to tap into Jesus' victory over sin, confident that he will send his angels to minister to us when we are tempted to be conformed to the world

instead of being re-formed in his image.

But we protest:

If Jesus really wanted to make us happy wouldn't he have abolished temptation? Wouldn't it be better to live in a world without temptation? It might seem so, especially if the world were our final destination. Scripture, however, tells us that God permits us to be tested not because he doesn't love but because he does love us. When we struggle with temptation, we come to realize that our greatness, our dignity, and our joy do not lie in our strength, but rather in our reliance upon the Lord, our openness to his love. And in his love, he gives us the strength each day to fulfill our baptismal promises, when we pledged 'to renounce Satan and all his works'. In fact, it is by relying on the strength of the Lord's love, not our own, that we grow stronger, that the virtues begin to grow and develop within us.

## **Conclusion**

So my plea with you this afternoon is simple: give Lent a chance.

Let's not disregard these forty days of Lent as a time of gloom and doom but rather as a time to make a new beginning in our spiritual journey, a new beginning in our relationship with Jesus, a new freedom from the sins that bring us so much unhappiness, and new and more generous openness to serving the needs of those around us, especially the poor and the vulnerable. In this way, when Lent has its course, we will be prepared to share more fully in that newness of life that Christ won for us by his death and resurrection.

May God bless us and keep us always in His love.