

First Sunday of Lent – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – February 18, 2018
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As I participated in our Mardi Gras Dinner Auction last weekend, I spent some time reminiscing about New Orleans, about the great fun of the parades and the beads and standing in the neutral ground, and about how, believe it or not, Mardi Gras is really a wonderful family time – except in the French Quarter, that is. We tend to think of New Orleans and Las Vegas and New York, for that matter, as cities of sin, as modern day Sodoms and Gomorrahs. We concentrate on the unwholesome activities, the drinking and the gambling, and somehow think that if we travel there the temptations would be too great. In those cities, and a few others, I'm sure, we imagine that we would be walking on the devil's turf, that we would find temptation around every corner. Well, not only is that a great exaggeration of the relative decadence of New Orleans and Las Vegas and the other cities, it also fails to acknowledge the reality of temptation in our lives.

Fully human, Jesus experienced life as we do. He was hungry and thirsty and tired at times. And today's gospel reminds us that he was also tempted into sin. Just as he does with all of us, Satan tempted Jesus, tried to entice him into sin. And just where was that temptation? In the bustling market place of Jerusalem? Along the dark alleys on the seedy side of town? Did Jesus have to travel to Athens or Corinth or Rome to be tempted? No, Jesus encountered temptation alone in the desert, in the quiet solitude of his own thoughts. Temptation, you see, is not some external force, it comes from within. We don't need to be surrounded by vices to be tempted. Satan doesn't need to scream at us. The most alluring temptations, the ones we have the most difficult time resisting, are often those softly whispered in the silence of our hearts.

So if we accept the reality of temptation, if we understand that we are vulnerable even in our most quiet and private moments, then how do we overcome those temptations, how do we resist the whispers of the devil? Sometimes we try to drown out the noise. If we surround ourselves with enough distractions – good, wholesome activities – then we won't hear the temptations. There is some value in this approach. We do need to strengthen ourselves by coming together as a Christian community in prayer, by engaging in works of charity, by keeping physically active. But that alone won't work. We cannot spend every moment of every day busy, trying to escape temptation or trying to drown it out. At some point, we will need to be quiet and the devil's soft whispers will struggle once again to capture our attention.

So if we cannot avoid temptation altogether – and if we cannot escape it or drown it out – how do we resist it, how do we overcome that inclination to sin?

Look again at the gospel. Jesus didn't go out into the desert completely alone. St. Mark tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the living God, wanted Jesus to spend some quiet time, alone, in prayer, reflecting upon the public ministry he was about to undertake. Yes, that quiet time would inevitably mean that temptations would come, but the presence of the Spirit – the presence of God's love, his life, his grace meant that those temptations could be resisted. We cannot overcome temptations on our own. As fallen, sinful human beings, we lack the strength. But with God's grace, we can move mountains. So the key to resisting the whispers of the devil is to be strengthened by God's grace.

Well, you may ask, how do I get that grace? When can I know that I have been embraced by God's love? Let's place today's gospel passage in context. It is from the first chapter of St. Mark's gospel – verses 12 through 15. Immediately before this passage, in verses 7 through 11, we learn that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John. Jesus' human soul had received grace through that baptism, through that sacrament, through that privileged encounter with God. That message is brought home in our second reading today from the first letter of St. Peter. Like Noah and the other inhabitants of the ark, we too are saved through water, through the waters of baptism when sanctifying grace offers us a clear conscience. The Spirit we received at baptism was strengthened in Confirmation and is continually nourished in the Eucharist. We nurture the Spirit of God in our reading of Scripture, through our prayer and fasting and works of charity. That's how we overcome temptation. Through grace – the grace we received at our baptism, the grace that was strengthened at our confirmation. That grace is the flame of faith that must be nurtured and protected in our hearts.

But grace, as most of us have discovered, is fleeting and fragile. We feel God's presence one minute and seem to be far from his presence the next. That's why we need to hear the words of Jesus from today's gospel over and over again: This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel. In this season of Lent, some among us are preparing for baptism, preparing for that great outpouring of sanctifying grace. But for those of us baptized many years ago, for those of us who seem to struggle with temptation because the flame of faith in our heart is in danger of going out, well this season is for us as well. During Lent we are invited to renew the grace of baptism in our own hearts, to nurture that flame of faith, to repent and believe in the good news of Jesus Christ again. God's life and love are waiting for us, surrounding us. We merely need to accept that love, to believe that salvation in Jesus Christ is indeed good news. We need to be renewed in that covenant relationship with God that was established at our baptism. We will be tempted to turn away, but the kingdom of God is at hand! We need only to repent and to believe in the gospel!