

Connecting with the Sunday Readings

First Sunday of Lent

Gospel Word

Matthew 4:1–11

We are now entering Lent, one of the holiest seasons of the Church year. In the early Church, the Lent season began as a time of intense preparation for Easter, when new candidates were brought into the Church through Baptism. These forty days invite us to prepare to renew our own baptismal commitment at Easter and to be strengthened against the forces of evil which distract us from accomplishing the Father's will in our own lives.

Even in this Gospel, as always, temptation is about choosing lesser goods. We all have a tendency to compromise. Often, we are faced not with a decision between good and evil, but between two goods, one greater and one lesser. The lesser good is often wrapped in more beautiful paper.

The three temptations in this Gospel touch on three fears that are common to all of us. The first is our fear of not having enough of something. In this case Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread. There were lots of stones around, but no bread. It was a powerful temptation. Who wouldn't choose bread over rocks for supper? The second fear is not having control over life. Humans want to be in charge of everything! So the temptation is about presuming humans can control even God—Jump off a cliff and God, or one of God's angels, will catch you. It is the temptation to have God do the bidding of human beings. The third temptation exposes the fear of not having enough social power. The temptation invites Jesus to rule the world. All he has to do to attain such power is to become a slave to evil.

All these temptations can be wrapped into one huge temptation: Think and act as if you were God and in total control of everything! Is not that what all of us would like for ourselves? We don't want limits. We want to be in charge. Our "wants" are limitless. We want a new car every year, the latest fashions when they are still fashionable, the best of food and drink and add to that the best and most recently developed technological toys. Isn't that what everyone wants? No restraints, no boundaries, no suffering and in the end, no death. And what's the cost? We deny what's best and most important in our humanity. To live according to God's plan is a free choice. The Tempter provides us with choices, too. It is up to us to discern what a lesser good is.

Living the Word

Jesus comes out of the desert and is about to step into public view. He has come to teach us what it is to be human in accordance with God's plan for creation. Like him, each year we enter a kind of wilderness for forty days to gain strength for living a fuller Christian life. As he did, we want to do all we can to deepen our relationship to God and to sharpen our sense of who we are before this wonderful God we call Father. But for this to happen, we have to freely choose it. When choice comes into the picture, there will be options. These options come to us each day with the rising of the sun. To be loved and cared for by God requires us to be ourselves, not to try and play the role of God. Our role is to be human. The Tempter wants us to be other than ourselves.

Each day we are invited to accept the limitations that come with being human. Of course, we'd like to change stones into fresh baked bread. Of course, we'd like to snap our fingers and have our credit card bill erased. Of course, we'd like to tell a few people where to go. And of course, we'd like everyone to do as we tell them. But that's not the way it works. That is not the path to happiness and holiness. Holiness comes from accepting the life that God gives us each day. While we are tempted to want it to be much better, we choose instead the satisfaction that comes from knowing we are doing what God intends—and that's the greatest of all gifts.

*—by David Thomas, PhD, Co-Director,
The Bethany Family Institute*

One-line Prayer

God the Father, we thank you for creating us. Help us to be grateful even for the limits that are ours.
Amen.