

Father O'Connor's Homily for 18 February 2024
First Sunday of Lent-B

Genesis 9: 8-15

1 Peter 3: 18-22

Mark 1: 12-15

When I say the word “temptation,” what comes to your mind? Is it a moist, chocolate brownie with thick frosting? Is it a packet of hot, salty French fries? If that is what you are thinking, we need to go a bit deeper. Because temptation to sin is a significant factor in all of our lives.

Temptation affects young people, older people, and all of us in between. None of us is exempt. Even Jesus was tempted.

Today's Gospel for this First Sunday of Lent has Jesus going out into the desert for forty days and forty nights to pray and to fast and to be tempted by Satan.

Jesus “was tempted in every way that we are, yet He never sinned,” as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews [Hebrews 4: 15]. And when He came out of that desert experience, Jesus says to us, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”

When you are at the supermarket, standing in the check-out line, there are those tabloids there in the rack. Now I am sure that nobody here actually buys one, but I'll bet that you might glance at the front pages.

Why do we do this? Maybe it gives us some assurance that, “There are people out there who do worse things than I do!” Or it might be the thought that, “I guess I'm not the only one who does that!”

But deep down inside of us there can be a fascination with someone else's downfall – or alleged downfall. And yet, when the truth is told, we all have our temptations, our sins and our downfalls. And we hope that nobody will ever find out exactly what they are, yes?

Temptation is part of our human condition. Oftentimes temptation appears to be so insignificant – like it doesn't really make a whole lot of difference. But after we commit the sin, our eyes are suddenly opened in shame over what we just knowingly fell for.

Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and then were ashamed and tried to hide from God. But what they did was so significant that, ever since, we all come into this world marked by their original sin and in need of the baptismal waters of redemption.

There's a little rhyme that goes:

Knock – knock.

“Who's there?” I asked.

“A little lonely sin.”

“Enter,” I said.

And then all hell broke in.

That little rhyme says a lot, doesn't it? Our sins can seem so small to begin with, but then all hell breaks in.

That's one aspect of temptation.

Another is that temptation can lead to a kind of sin that becomes habit-forming, even addictive in its nature.

When I was a child, I had an allergy to chocolate. When I ate chocolate, I would get sick. I remember one time in first grade when I ate some chocolate at lunchtime. And after lunch I got sick in the classroom.

Now you would think I would have learned my lesson. But I continued to eat chocolate and get sick until I was fourteen years old!

I could ask myself now, “I wonder if I have outgrown that allergy?” Well, I am not willing to take the risk. So I can tell you today that I have not eaten one bit of chocolate since my freshman year of high school.

I mention this because there is a parallel with sin. We sin, we are sorry and we say, “I will never do that again.” And then what happens? We think, “Well, maybe this time it will be a little different.” Or, “I am stronger now, so it won't affect me that way.” Or, “I deserve a little freedom.” And we keep doing it again and again and again.

When are we finally going to wise up and realize that sin does not deliver what it promises? Instead, sin offends God, and it delivers us shame and guilt and pain!

So how can I stop? There is only one way – and it is not through sheer willpower alone. We need God's grace to recognize temptation and sin for what they are. We need God's grace to seek His forgiveness, and then we need His grace to change our lives by changing our habits. Our God is always ready and willing to give us the grace that we need – especially as we observe this season of Lent.

What kind of God do we sinners serve as we “repent and believe in the Gospel?” We read in Psalm 103, “The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion” [Psalm 103: 8].

A powerful way that Our Lord offers us His mercy and compassion is in the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation or Confession. Jesus Christ, knowing us and loving us, gives us the opportunity in the Sacrament of Penance to name our weaknesses and sins in our own words, and to express our sorrow, to receive His forgiveness through the sacramental words of Absolution [*“And I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”*], and then to go back into our daily-living a bit stronger and more able – with His grace – to change our lives by changing our habits.

We celebrate the Sacrament of Penance here at Saint Joseph every Saturday from 11:00 AM until 12:00 Noon. And every Thursday evening after the 7:00 PM Mass until 8:30 PM.

A week from this coming Wednesday evening, February 28th, we will have our annual diocesan-wide “Evening of Confession” in every Catholic church that has a resident priest from 5:00 PM until 8:00 PM. What a gift! And what an opportunity! I encourage everyone to celebrate this great sacrament of the Lord’s mercy sometime during this season of Lent.

I will leave you with a classic story. There was an Indian brave who longed to climb a distant mountain. And one day he did, all by himself. He got to the top of that snow-capped mountain, and he felt very proud of himself as he looked out and saw the villages below.

And then he heard a rattling sound near his feet. It was a rattlesnake who said to him, “Indian brave, it’s so cold up here, and I’m so hungry. Would you pick me up and place me inside your warm cloak, next to your heart, and carry me down this mountain?”

The Indian brave said, “Nothin’ doin,’ snake. I know what you’ll do. You’ll bite me and then I’ll die.” And the snake responded: “No, I won’t. I promise!”

So the Indian brave picked up the rattlesnake and tucked it inside his cloak next to his heart. He carried that snake down the mountain and placed it gently on the ground. He was very proud of himself for his courage. Then he heard a rattling sound, and the snake bit him in the leg.

The Indian brave said, “Snake, you promised you wouldn’t do that! Why did you bite me?”

The snake responded, “Indian brave, you knew what I was before you carried me close to your heart.”

That story makes a sharp point about temptation. We know what it is before we carry it close to our hearts. So don't be surprised by temptation. And don't underestimate it either. Our sin can become habit-forming, even addictive.

The remedy is turning to Jesus, our Savior, who says to us today, "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."

So be encouraged, knowing that Jesus "was tempted in every way that we are, yet He never sinned" [Hebrews 4: 15].

And remember what kind of God we sinners serve. "The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion" [Psalm 103: 8].

Now, five days already into Lent, don't be afraid. "Repent, and believe in the Gospel."