

1st Sunday of Lent - Matthew 4:1-11

A Catholic priest working in an inner city was walking down an alley one evening on his way home when a young man came down the alley behind him and poked a knife against his back. "Give me your money," the young man said.

The priest opened his jacket and reached into an inner pocket to remove his wallet, exposing his clerical collar. "Oh, I'm sorry, Father," said the young man, "I didn't see your collar. I don't want YOUR money."

Trembling from the scare, the priest removed a cigar from his shirt pocket and offered it to the young man. "Here," he said. "Have a cigar."

"Oh, no, I can't do that," the young man replied, "I gave them up for Lent."

There is a strange line in today's gospel which I think we should discuss, because, if we understand the line correctly, it can show us the way to a profitable Lenten season.

In three of the four gospels, Jesus is **tempted** by the devil before he begins his public ministry. This temptation happens in the desert, and here is where the problematic line is found.

It says, "And Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be **tempted** by the devil." So why would the Spirit of God lead Jesus **into** temptation?

We would expect that God's Spirit would lead Jesus **away** from the devil. Yet the text is very clear that the Spirit brings Jesus right into the devil's presence. What sense can we make of this unexpected and contrary action on the part of the Spirit?

The Bible itself gives no explanation. But here's the basic rule: When the Spirit of God does something to Jesus or to us, we can be sure that that action is for **our** benefit.

Therefore, this strange line in the gospel suggests that there is a goodness or an advantage in temptation. It suggests that there is something to learn from being tested that can lead to our spiritual growth.

So, what can we learn from temptation? Two things come to mind immediately. This first is this: When we are tempted, we realize that we are weak.

When things are going along without any problems, when we move from one success to another, it is easy for us to imagine that it is **our own** strength and **our own** abilities that guarantee a successful life.

But when we experience temptation, we have to admit that our abilities and strength are limited. After all, we could fall. With just a change in the circumstances or a bad decision on our part, our family, our job, our reputation could all be undone.

So, temptation shows us how **fragile** life is. It reminds us that a successful life results not only from **our own** efforts but also from God's grace. Temptation shows our weakness and invites us to trust more deeply in God's help.

The second **good** thing that can come from temptation is that it gives us a **direction**. The areas in which we are tempted are the surest sign of what actions are required in our life.

For example, if we find ourselves tempted to be self-indulgent, to do very little, to eat too much, to cater to our own desires, that temptation is telling us that there is too much **taking** in our life and not enough **giving**.

So, Lent becomes a time to get out of the bag of potato chips, away from the television and the computer, and choose some action of service that will help someone else.

If we find ourselves time and again becoming angry or vengeful toward someone who has hurt us, then that temptation is telling us that we are wounded. Lent then becomes a time in which we open ourselves to healing and forgiveness, because it is only through forgiveness that we can become free.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil because the Spirit understood that Jesus, in His humanity, would learn something from that temptation. And, so can we.

This Lenten season is a time to ask ourselves, “Where am I tested in life? Where am I tempted,” and then allow our temptations to give us direction on what we should do during these 40 days.

And, if following that path, we discover that things are difficult, that it is not easy to address issues in our relationship, that it is not easy to serve, that it is not easy to forgive, we should **not** become discouraged.

Because temptation also tells us that we are weak, it assures us that we are not alone, and it invites us to trust more deeply in God’s help.

During these 40 days of Lent, examine your life and see where God is leading **you**. What temptations are being placed in your life? And learn from God what needs to be addressed to make you truly free to accept His grace and mercy.

AMEN.