

Homily: 1st Sunday of Lent: Cycle A: 2017: Gen 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7; Ps 51; Rom 5: 12-19; Mt 4: 1-11

“The Spiritual Battle to Grow in Holiness”

Lent is a golden opportunity to grow in holiness. All of our practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are a means to the ultimate end of growing in union and harmony with the Blessed Trinity who is all good, all true, and all loving. The Lord beckons us over and over again in the Sacred Scriptures to “*be holy as He is holy.*” But this is a difficult spiritual battle for us humans - not impossible - but difficult. The Scriptures today tell us why.

1. **The reality is: we are in a spiritual battle in this life.** We can easily forget that in the busyness of life. Objective **good and evil** are real. The **devil** is real, even though he usually disguises himself behind many masks in the modern world: the biggest one is tricking people into thinking he doesn't really exist, and so he gets an easy foot into the door of our hearts and minds since our guard is down in relation to him. Remember as we see in the Gospel today: Jesus came into the world to defeat the devil, destroy his kingdom and set man free from the curse of original sin and actual sin.
2. **The huge mistake of Adam and Eve:** Realize there was a first man and first woman at some point in history, and Eve the first woman unfortunately enters into a dialog with the devil - this led to first her downfall spiritually, and then to her husband Adam falling into the same spiritual trap of sin. What a sad reality! Remember the devil is much smarter than we are: he has an angelic intelligence which is higher than human intelligence, and according to Sacred Tradition he was the highest angel before he fell from grace through his pride; as a result, his intelligence became darkened to some degree - by rejecting God who is the source of all truth - but nonetheless the devil is still super-smart. Angelic intelligence immediately grasps the reality of a situation **intuitively**. Human intelligence on the other hand, even those of us who think we are really intuitive, needs an extra step to get in touch with reality, which is through the process of **reasoning**: looking at cause and effect and drawing conclusions, which takes time for us to

figure out. The devil knows that it takes us time to figure things out, so he tricks Eve by getting her off track in her reasoning process by entering into a dialog of falsehood with her. **Satan is the master of lies.** Jesus says the devil is a “*liar from the beginning.*” **He always wraps up sin in a nice package.** In the case of Adam and Eve, he convinces them to forget what God told them about the tree of good and evil and makes God out to be an arbitrary tyrant who is keeping them from true happiness. Thus Eve says to herself, “*the tree is good for food, pleasing to the eyes and desirable for gaining wisdom,*” - her mistake in reasoning is that she doesn't reflect deeper than seeing the desirable but deceptive external package given by the devil in his dialog of falsehood with her - not realizing fully the nice external package- “of being in charge” - contains death inside as the “evil prize” since the reality is: *we are not God but finite creatures created by the Lord, and so tragically Eve disobeys God in this serious matter and draws her husband Adam into this same tragic choice.* And the fall of man begins. The message is: **our spiritual falls as humans always go back to the original temptation of the human race by the devil, namely to forget God and be “in charge.”** We all encounter this same trick of the devil on a daily basis, sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small, but the bottom line is he is always whispering in our ears: “you can be like God.” You decide what is good and evil for you - *don't listen to God; don't listen to the Catholic Church which speaks with God's truth on matters of faith and morals, protected and guided by the Holy Spirit.* No the devil says: *you make your own path to Heaven. Be self-willed - don't be obedient to God - that is degrading to “your dignity” to decide for yourself* – but that lie of satan won't lead to Heaven but in fact to Hell! Don't be tricked by him!

3. **Lent is a special time to wake up to this reality of spiritual warfare!** Jesus battles the devil in the desert in the Gospel today to begin to undo the damage the first humans brought onto the human race and to the world through their tragic dialog with the devil. Jesus will win the ultimate victory over the devil, sin, and the death that is the result of sin, on the Cross. Remember Jesus is able to overcome the devil because He has His mind and heart and will focused on His

Heavenly Father. This is **the secret** to winning the war against sin, the devil and our fallen nature: **Keep your eyes fixed on God**. **When you are tempted in any way, immediately turn to God in prayer!** If the temptations are really bad, e.g., against purity, anger, etc., offer them for the conversion of others who are close to giving in to those temptations somewhere in the world right now; then you beat the devil at his own game: he is trying to bring you down and you offer them to help someone else resist his temptations to sin. Remember God is not a tyrant who gives us laws and rules to keep us from true happiness, but rather through embracing His teachings made known to us through our Catholic faith, we enter on the narrow path to true happiness leading to Heaven, which is rooted in God's very life of charity. **If we want to experience ultimate beauty, goodness, truth and love - follow the path Jesus lays out for us in the Gospel and continues to give us in the Catholic faith**. Lent is a time to **reflect**, to **repent** of the ways of sin, to ask for God's forgiveness, especially in the Sacrament of **Reconciliation**, and then to make **spiritual restitution** for the damage our sins have caused to the order of **reality**, in **relation** to God, others, and ourselves by embracing a self-giving life of deeper prayer, fasting and *almsgiving* and begging for the **grace** (life) of God that alone can enable us to win the spiritual battle. Remember there is no such thing as "cheap grace or mercy", i.e., there is no true forgiveness from God or other people without repentance on our part, for the true meaning of the charity of God is not merely benevolence or "unconditional love", but rather as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it so well, "charity is friendship", and looking out for the true good of the other as well as for ourselves in the Lord's truth and love. **What an amazing thing: God calls us to be His intimate friends and to be reconciled with Him and our fellow human beings - to turn from the ways of sin and infidelity to the ways of holiness and faithfulness!** Lent is a call to embrace this reality on a deeper level, by rejecting the manifold wiles of the devil through the power of God's amazing grace. Remember God only permits the devil to tempt us to sin and evil because He knows if we resist the temptations with the help of His grace, we will grow in holiness. May we all have a blessed and spiritually transforming season of Lent. God bless you.