**1st Sunday of Lent, Cycle A**

March 8/9, 2014

Genesis 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7; Romans 5: 12-19; Matthew 4: 1-11

Well, welcome to Lent! As you can see from the change from green to violet, we are in a new liturgical season. Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, and in about 40 days we will be celebrating the Resurrection. A parishioner recently reminded me that in years past I had said Lent was my favorite time of year. I suppose in a way it is for it gives us a time to confront ourselves, to change our lives with fasting, prayer, and giving alms to the poor, all in preparation for one of the greatest events the world has ever seen, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In Lent, we have forty days to confront that basic Christian choice, that fundamental option of our lives: Do I choose God, and goodness, and life, eternal life, and happiness and truth and peace OR do I choose death, evil, sin, Satan, lies and discontent? This is the fundamental choice we are faced with in Lent, and although all of us sitting here today, no doubt, would say we choose God and life and peace and happiness and truth, we must then face that other reality which is such a choice is also a choice for the Cross, for it is only through the Cross that we will find eternal life. To choose the Cross is to choose to struggle against sin, evil, Satan and death. We must pick up our crosses every day if we are to be disciples of Jesus, and we have the help of the sacraments, and prayer, fasting and almsgiving as we pick up the Cross.

In my preaching, the emphasis is almost always on God’s infinite love for every human being. Each human person is loved by God - no exceptions - and God desires to be loved by each human being whom he creates. God always wants a love relationship to exist between him and us, a relationship grounded in faith, a relationship that is rooted in hope and in love. To love God with all our minds, hearts, and strength, is this not the greatest of all the commandments? This relationship of faith, hope, and love with the God who created us is truly *Good News* and the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. **This Good News cannot be** **understated**, I believe, and so I cannot help but preach this wonderful Gospel of Love, preach that God loves each human being and he desires that each human person love him in return.

Yet, our readings today and Lent itself tell us that evil, and a person of evil whom we call Satan, are real. We know that Satan has been truly and completely defeated by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Satan and evil can no longer have the last say on anything anymore and that he cannot prevent us from having that relationship of love with God, from obeying that greatest of all commandments. Nonetheless, Satan still alive and has power and influence. As St. Peter says in his first epistle, the devil prowls like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

We simply cannot play around with Satan if we want to be in love with God. We can’t mess with Satan and get away with it, for he is far too clever, far too intelligent for us to think we can out-fox him at his own game. Only God can outwit him. Jesus the Son of God was able to do that, as we heard in the Gospel, but we really cannot without God’s help. We cannot argue with Satan because if we try, he will confuse us. We have to simply avoid him and refuse to engage him. We cannot go where he is found. In other words, we have to leave him alone and evil things alone. When he shows up in our lives, we must tell him to leave and then immediately turn our attention to that fundamental choice we have made to choose God and cling to Him.

It’s dangerous to play around with him; it’s not acceptable; it brings havoc into your life; it weakens your love for God. God alone brings you true peace, true goodness, true life, not Satan.

My friends, we are God’s children. We are God’s beloved children. We are sons and daughter of God. This is our identity. It cannot be taken from us. Satan will want to trick us into thinking we are not loved by God. He will try to get us to “prove it.” We do not have to prove anything to Satan. One of Satan’s best deceptions usually goes something like this, “God is not who he says he is, and you are not who God says you are.” He always wants to confuse us and lead us down a different road. He wants us to question ourselves and question God.

God never lays traps like that for us. When God speaks, he brings hope, truth and light. He clarifies. He says, “I am your Father. You are my son or daughter. You are loved by me.”

Yes, Lent is a time to struggle against evil, a time to be rid of sin, a time to embrace more fully our relationship with God, who loves us. God will always love us. The question is will we love him with a pure love, love him in the way we promised at our baptisms when we vowed to reject Satan, all his false promises and empty works.

So during Lent we have the fundamental choice to make. It is the same choice we had at our baptisms: God and goodness or Satan and evil. This struggle, this essential choice every Christian must make, entails the Cross, for it is through the struggle, through the Cross, that life is found in abundance.