

STORY:

There is a story of a very overweight man who decided that during the season of Lent he was going to make every effort to lose several pounds by cutting back on sweets and fatty foods. He had an incredible “sweet tooth” and this posed a real struggle for him. However he was determined that this would be a very successful Lenten project/fast for him. After all, he received ashes on Ash Wednesday and things were looking up. He also told everyone around him of his Lenten pledge.

He even changed the route he usually drove to work so as to avoid passing his favourite bakery. However, one morning not long into his diet, he arrived at his office with a large sugary cake. Surprised by his lack of resolve, his fellow workers chided him: “What are you doing?” I thought you gave sweets for Lent?” “WE all really thought you were serious this time?” “What gives?”

“What could I do?” answered the man as he explained how by force of habit, he had driven by the bakery and seen the trays loaded with goodies in the window. “I decided that this was no accident that I happened to pass by this way, so I prayed, ‘Lord, if you really want me to have one of these delicious cakes, let me find a parking place right in front of the bakery.’ And sure enough, on the ninth time around the block, there it was!”

As funny as such a story is, I think in many ways it can reflect some of our own failed attempts, in regards to some of our own Lenten promises. Let’s just backtrack a little here for a moment and ask ourselves the question what is the season of Lent about in the first place. The answer to that question can be found in one of the formulas that we used in the Ash Wednesday liturgy: **“Repent, and believe in the Good News/Gospel.”** These two action verbs *repent & believe* are key to understanding what the Lenten journey is all about.

Repent means facing up to all those things in my life: my attitudes, my choices, my actions etc. that have distanced me from God’s all embracing love. In order to do this I need to understand the role that temptation plays in my life and furthermore to take it very, very seriously. Today’s gospel can shed some light on this. Jesus is led out into the desert. The desert is a place of formation and reformation. Moses led the Israelites into the desert to be formed into the people of God. Jesus goes out into the desert to do battle. Good vs. Evil. He offers us a wonderful example as to how we are to deal with temptations and no one is immune from them. So what can we learn from the Divine Master?

- 1. Jesus does not run from temptation. In fact it is the Holy Spirit who leads Him into the desert to face these demons.**
- 2. Jesus fasts first. He wants to be lean and prepared and alert and hungry.**
- 3. Jesus is facing His identity. The temptations are all about how He is and who He is.**

4. Jesus is confronting those specific temptations which are aimed at getting Him to use His power strictly for Himself and not for others. In the end He does well. He wins the battle with the demons but more importantly He gives us a plan of action to deal with our own temptations.

And so, what about our temptations? What are to make of them? What is behind these temptations or perhaps better still, who? WE often hear the great saints refer to the concept of “spiritual warfare.” Jesus went one on one with evil.

I am personally grounded deeply in Ignatian spirituality, and it certainly was a major theme of St. Ignatius of Loyola. He often spoke about the Two Standards in which he asks the question whose side on your on: Satan’s? or God’s? What message do you buy into? The Gospel of Jesus Christ? Or the world’s. Do you seek riches, honor pride and control? Or do you prefer to follow Jesus and in doing so risk the possibility of encountering poverty, dishonour, and humility.

Ignatius further emphasized this point when he presented what he referred to as “The Rules for Spiritual Discernment” to help those in the spiritual journey to better recognize what was happening in their interior life. (Where are the weaknesses in your armour? Where are you most vulnerable? “Know thyself” says St. Augustine and he knew a thing or two about temptation.

“To repent” allows us to face and change all that gets in the way of coming closer to God who wants and has always wanted to have a deep personal and intimate relationship with all of His beloved sons and daughters and that is precisely who you and I are. This is what was behind making a covenant with and renewing that covenant with His people was all about. (We are going to hear a lot more about those covenants throughout this season of Lent, of course culminating with the covenant made through the Person/Message of Jesus Christ and the impact of His Death & Resurrection on all those who believe in the Gospel (The Paschal Mystery.

So this brings me to my first set of questions to you this afternoon (this morning): How seriously do you takes these words of Jesus, **“Repent and believe in the Gospel? How are you responding to them now and how have you responded to them in the past? What impact have they had on you in regards to your spiritual life? How have you dealt with temptations? How effective have your Lenten plans helped in combating some of these temptations?**

Here are some suggestions from author Peter Gomes taken from a work he published some years ago entitled: “The Good Book.” They are:

Name the temptation: Naming the evil we face makes it utterly real and sharpens our attempts to focus and deal with it.

Name the tempter: What and who is behind all of this. (Satan is not some harmless story book character. He is a real entity to be reckoned with. His prime purpose and have no delusions about this: is to destroy you. He doesn’t play fair and he doesn’t take any prisoners.

Practice resistance: Moral training, like any other form of training (e.g. music, sports) takes discipline to acquire. Be strong. Don't back down. Be pro-active instead of passive.

Call for help: Relying on one's own resources alone is a recipe for disaster. Be open to God's grace and the operative word here is "grace." Share your concern with friends, a mentor, a priest, a spiritual director. Don't go it alone. Entrust yourself entirely to God while summoning forth your greatest strengths. Be courageous. Think of Pres. Obama's inspiring words: "Yes, we can.....Yes you can."

You can do it with the help of God. Believe. Then there is the theme of the Vancouver Winter Olympics: "DO YOU BELIEVE?"

Let me conclude by sharing with you a little offering from a little reflection entitled: All I Need to Know, I Learned from Noah's Ark," and apply it to the application of a good Lenten plan of action:

- 1. Don't miss the boat: It's Lent—show up for it. Don't let this opportunity pass by to do that which you did not think that you could do.**
- 2. Stay fit. Like Noah, when you're 600 years old, someone might ask you to do something really big. So stay fit during Lent. Exercise your body through fasting. Instead of giving it more, give it less. Exercise your spirit by praying for those you do not want to pray for. This requires a great deal of inner strength on your part and it helps develop spiritual muscles. Also try to give as much as you are able to with your time & resources instead of just focusing on yourself.**
- 3. For safety's sake travel in pairs: Travel with someone during Lent for support and encouragement. Use a buddy system. Do the same for another. Hold each other accountable or at least remind one another of what your intentions are on this First Sunday of Lent.**
- 4. Remember the ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic was built by professionals: Lent brings out the amateur in everyone. There are no professionals at fasting, praying or almsgiving. The potential for success exists in us all.**
- 5. Don't forget that we are all in the same boat: WE are all in the same boat; we need each other. We need to struggle with each other and for each other.**

All of this is to say, is that Lent is a lot more than simply just giving up chocolates. It is about disposing ourselves to real spiritual transformation in our lives. So be courageous and be creative. Most of all, let God be part of your Lenten plans.

God bless.