

This morning's Gospel reading sets the theme for us today, an appropriate theme as we begin our observance of Lent -- the theme of sin and temptation. It's an appropriate one because it is one with which we all struggle with throughout our lives. Temptation.... A test we face everyday.

I recently read a story about a little girl named Robyn who desperately wanted a new bicycle. Her plan was to save her nickels, dimes and quarters until she finally had enough to buy a new 10-speed. No matter how hard she tried, her saving account never seemed to grow. Finally Robyn decided to go before God and ask God personally to help her save her money.

Kneeling beside her bed, she prayed, "Dear God, please help me save my money for a new bike, and please, Lord, don't let the ice cream man come down my street again tomorrow."

In October as I was waiting in my doctor's office and I came across this from the Reader's Digest I was reading. A man Jim Grant decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery and fast food restaurants.

One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic coffee cake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but his smile remained nonetheless. "This is a special coffee cake," he explained. "I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a host of coffee cakes on sale!"

Surely God won't have placed me in front of the bakery if knowing how I felt about my diet. So, I prayed, "Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot open right in front of the door of the bakery. And sure enough, would you believe, the eighth time around the block, there it was!"

All of us know what it is to enter the wilderness of temptation. We have all been in the deserts of our lives. Temptation is part and parcel of every human condition.

And we ourselves do an injustice as Christians when we overlook the seriousness of this topic. Temptation is like a wedge. In the world of physics, the mechanical world, there is hardly a more powerful application than a wedge. Once you get its thin edge in, it's just a matter of time and force how far that wedge will be able to split things apart.

It can be the hardest stone, the toughest bit of wood, no matter what, is not able to resist the power of a wedge to drive things apart. That's what temptation is like -- the wedge that seeks to drive us apart from God.

And so, the good news for us this morning is that we do not have to give in to temptation. There is One who has faced the tempter and defeated him. There is One who stands ready to come to our aid; For our Savior Jesus Christ has promised to strengthen us in our times and trials of temptation.

Our Scripture reading this morning recounts for us Jesus' encounter with the devil, the temptations he faced, and his triumph over them. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. It was not the only time Jesus would face temptation. In fact, throughout his life and ministry Jesus faced temptation.

He was tempted to abandon the mission the Heavenly Father in heaven had given him. He was tempted to go his own way. He was tempted to trust in his own power. But throughout his life, he was able to face temptation without falling; he was able to endure without sinning.

And the question for us this morning is: What can we learn from Jesus about dealing with temptation? What help can Christ give us in our battle with that power that seeks to drive us away from God? How can we pass on under this constant testing?

These are important questions for us to consider because temptation is one of those things that unite all of us. We are all tempted and we all sin.

To Satan, everyday, 365 days a year (including Sundays) is open season on the children of God. The devil seeks out the weakest and the strongest amongst us, and then quietly guides us down his path of deceit and hardship. In fact, it seems that the closer to God we wish to be, the more we seek to live our lives by faith, the more temptation plagues us.

Think of it. The closer we start to get to Jesus, the faster Satan will step in to your life. It's a red flag to the devil himself. Strong Christians are like squeaky wheels that Satan loves to try to grease. And that's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." It's one thing to pray for forgiveness, but it's quite another to express our desire to live the Christian life by praying, "Lord, keep me from being tested beyond my power to resist all that Satan throws my way."

Someone has said that opportunity knocks only once, but it's temptation that keeps banging on our door! Jesus knew the power of temptation over the human heart and so he taught us how to deal with it.

Listen as he instructs the disciples on the night he was betrayed. Luke writes, "And he came out, and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place he said to them, 'Pray that you may not enter into temptation.' " Notice the linkage between prayer and temptation. When tempted, start praying.

What follows then in Luke's gospel is a description of Jesus' own battle with temptation. It is here that Jesus himself prays, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup, this burden from me ... But let it not be my will, but let your will be done."

His prayer is a prayer that God would give him strength to do what God required of him. That God... would deliver him in that time of struggle. Luke's description of this prayer leaves no doubt as to the struggle that our Lord faced.

Luke tells us, "And his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground."

Jesus knew what it was like to battle temptation. Jesus also knew he would be in heaven regardless of his earthly decisions. He could have said, this is just too much for me. As for the rest of your creation Father, let them fend for themselves. This is far too much for me to handle just to give these sinners forgiveness and eternal life with you in heaven.

It is interesting to note that when Jesus returned to the disciples that night at Gethsemane, he found them asleep. Jesus in anger could have been tempted to walk away, but he woke them, he instructed them once again, "Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation and stay with me."

There is a link between prayer and temptation. Jesus is telling us here that the first step in dealing with temptation is to pray -- pray, first and foremost, that we may not even experience temptation. For temptation as you know is the devil's way of leading us away from Jesus and into a life of hell.

M. Scott Peck, the author of the book The Road Less Traveled, once observed

that the word "evil" is "live" spelled backwards.

Temptation is the devil's way of turning things around, of leading us away from God's kingdom. For when we enter into temptation, we walk away from life. What are we to do..."Pray," Jesus says, "that you may not even enter into temptation."

We snicker when the actress in the musical Oklahoma sings, "I'm just a girl who can't say no." I smirk at Lady Gaga a popular female pop artist (if you want to call her a lady) who was quoted recently in saying, "To sin is human; but when you do, it just feels divine." Yes, what a great role model.

However, we are in a day and age when sinfulness is shown as a common and everyday thing. So, what sin is an acceptable behavior on television and in the movies. Some of our own lives are corrupted by the expanding gambling industry. Worldwide, thousands of people, young and old, lose their lives to alcohol and drug-related deaths.

And as long as we live, we must always take the power of the devil and temptation seriously. And that's why Jesus tells us that the first step in dealing with temptation is to pray. Pray that we may not be tempted, for temptation always leads us away from God.

The second thing we need to do in dealing with temptation is to acknowledge that it has great power over us. We need God's help in dealing with temptation. We need to affirm that there is One whose power to deal with the tempter is greater than ours, One who can do battle with the devil and soundly win. For without Jesus, we are sure to fail.

We have to be careful with our prayers. We dare not use our prayers to give God orders, because perhaps the ultimate temptation is to think that we know

more than God does, or to think that we care more than God cares, or that we see the future better than God. Our prayers must always be that we depend upon God to strengthen us and that the trust will lead us not into temptation. So, God's people, Lent is a time to send the devil a message. Look around you. What kind of friends are you keeping? What kind of places do you frequent?

What does your heavenly checkbook account say about the way you spend your life? Remember, temptation usually comes through a door that has deliberately been left open.

We have six weeks ahead of us -- six weeks to say to the Satan, as Jesus said, "Be gone, Go away from me!" For our church and our lives are occupied. Tell temptation to go back where it came from, for Christ is in here and in here.

Let us pray.... Almighty God, your blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan. Come quickly to help us when we are assaulted by many temptations of life. Help us stand firm and always trust in you. Help us to understand that through the power of your son Jesus Christ, we can face the future, turn from sin and temptation and gain eternal life forever with you. Amen.