

**First Sunday of Lent (Cycle B) Homily**  
St. William, Champion | February 21, 2021  
Gn 9:8-15 | 1 Pt 3:18-22 | Mk 1:12-15

**Deacon Bob Mintus**

I recently came across an article discussing how spring training was beginning on this past Thursday, February 18... For what, you might ask...? Well, it was for college football. It's hard to imagine, but teams have already started practicing now for the fall 2021 season. Six months from now, the season will begin, ready or not. So the practices begin, lots of them, full of conditioning and lots of repetition to make the proper techniques second nature. Elite players can't just rely on their physical gifts. The very best athletes are the most consistent performers, and can be counted on because everything is a matter of "muscle memory". They've practiced it so many times that it is a reflex – they don't have to think much about it at all.

Now I was never an elite athlete, but I do know about muscle memory. I was a paperboy growing up, and delivered about 85 papers each day, for four years. On my route there were various little things you had to know – like this customer wanted his paper on the back porch, this one wanted it between the screen and front door, and

so on. I practiced my route every day and had it down to a science, to the point where I was done in 45 minutes. But what astounded me was that there were a number of days that I would finish my route and couldn't remember delivering the paper to a certain customer... But when I checked, I found that I always had left them a paper, even if I couldn't remember. I could literally do the route without much thought.

I'm sure that many of you have similar experiences, if you think about it. There are the things that we do with very little thought because we've practiced that activity time after time. Some of these behaviors are good – like when we automatically hold the door open for other people or when we move over to let incoming traffic merge in to the highway. Others aren't so good. Maybe we have a lead foot or we tend to make snap judgements about others based on a first impression. Maybe we hold on to the things that hurt us longer than we need to. These things, frequently practiced and repeated, become habits and are a part of who we are.

For Jesus, his forty days in the desert were his spring training for three years of public ministry. Mark and the other Gospels tell us that

immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan River, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert for forty days. It was a time for him to make sure that he was fully committed to his mission and firm up anything that wasn't 100% ready.

This Wednesday, we began our Lenten journey with ashes and an invitation and a challenge to change our hearts to be ready to fully celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter. Perhaps we've already begun to prepare through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. On the other hand, maybe we've started out with the best of intentions but our actual practices haven't been so successful thus far. Keep in mind that we can't rest on our laurels if we got off to a good start, but even if things haven't gone so well, we've got thirty six days to make our preparations and be ready.

If we're still struggling with what to do for Lent, Pope Francis has reminded us that "fasting involves being freed from all that weighs us down." He has offered us these suggestions, and they tie in well with our Parish theme for this Lent, "Mending Our Hearts, A New Kind of Hope":

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.

Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.

Fast from anger and be filled with patience.

Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.

Fast from worries and trust in God.

Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.

Fast from pressures and be prayerful.

Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.

Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.

Fast from grudges and be reconciled.

Fast from words and be silent – so you can listen.

The challenge before us is not insurmountable. We can do it.

With God's help, we can find healing and wholeness this Lent. The only question is are we ready and willing to put the time and effort into practicing doing the right things?