

Homily for the Rite of Election
First Sunday in Lent, Year "A"
Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption
March 1, 2020

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The Rite of Election we celebrate this afternoon is certainly one of the highlights of the year here in our archdiocese. It's a very privileged moment, this ceremony, more than any other throughout the year, when we see the diversity of our local church, the Archdiocese of San Francisco, as you have all gathered from parishes all throughout the three counties of our Archdiocese: San Francisco, Marin, and San Mateo. And it's a very happy occasion as we welcome our brother and sister catechumens and candidates in their preparation, final stage of preparation, for full communion and being received into the church. It's a sign of encouragement and inspiration for all of us because we are living in times when the dominating influences in the culture, let us say, they're not so sympathetic to the spiritual life and to the practice of religion. But it shows the timeless appeal of faith and especially the faith of Jesus Christ, and despite cultural and societal pressures pressing upon us, we all love the Lord and want to continue on the path toward him despite all of the attempts by his adversary to draw us away.

We hear about that in the Gospel, this Gospel reading about the temptation of Christ when he retreats to the desert for 40 days. This was right before he begins his public ministry. So he spends this time in intense prayer, and it's a moment when the devil tries to tempt him away from his Father's calling in his life. And when we look at the temptations the devil places before our Lord we can see it's always in one of these three ways that the devil tries to draw us away.

First, he says, "If you are the son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." Our Lord was fasting, so he was hungry. This is the temptation to satisfy his hunger, so the temptation to pleasure, to the immoderate use of pleasure.

Then the devil made him stand on the parapet of the temple and said to him, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down." This is the temptation to power. Our Lord, of course, has power over all of the forces of nature, and he could have done that. So the evil one is tempting him to indulge in pride in order to demonstrate his power.

And then finally, the Gospel tells us the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their magnificence, and he said he would give them to him. This is the temptation to greed, acquiring possessions and wealth for one's own selfish purposes rather than for doing God's will.

So it's always this triad, one of these three ways the devil tries to trip us up, by pleasure, power, or riches. Now, it's not that these things are bad in and of themselves, but it's rather the immoderate use of these things, when they become an end in and of themselves and are used contrary to God's design and his will for us, for our own selfish purposes rather than for God's will.

That is when we sin, and if we keep down that path, we become involved in one of those capital sins. We see them revealed here in this triad, gluttony and lust, pride, and greed. Notice too how the devil begins the temptation. He says, "If you are the son of God," the first two times. And then in the third temptation he says, "All these I shall give to you if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." That is always the ultimate goal of the evil one and he has all of his deceptions and traps and subtle ways to get us, to trip us up. That is why after the last temptation, our Lord rebukes him saying, "Get away, Satan." That temptation, prostrate yourself and worship me, is getting to the bottom line. That is his ultimate goal. While we see that in the Gospel reading, in the first reading, we see his strategy for trying to get us there.

Now notice the question he asks the woman. We're all familiar with this famous scene in the Garden of Eden and the tree and the forbidden fruit, the fall of our first parents. So the serpent asks her, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" You can almost hear the taunting here. Very subtle. 'Did he really tell you that?' So he begins to plant the seeds of doubt and then he enhances that by exaggerating the claim. "Did God tell you not to eat from *any* of the trees in the garden?" And we see in the woman's response that she falls for it. Yes, she acknowledges that it is the fruit only of that one tree that they are not to eat. It is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, "You shall not eat." But then she begins to fall into the trap. Notice what she says, "God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it lest you die.'"

Now, for brevity's sake, some of the verses were omitted in this reading that occur within this passage in the Book of Genesis and in between these verses. And here we see God gives the command to the man about not eating of that tree. God commands the man not to eat of the fruit of the tree. God does not say anything about touching or not touching the tree. He doesn't say anything about that. So she's falling into the trap, buying the exaggerated claim, thinking that, "Well, maybe God really is unreasonable here. Maybe he really is placing demands on us that are beyond what we should put up with." So you see what a brilliant psychological manipulator the devil is. He plants seeds of doubt, the seeds take root, and now instead of knowing God as the lover he is who gives the couple commandments to show his protection and his care for them, they instead see him as some sort of a cruel task master who deprives them of something pleasing and desirable that they want, that they should have and at least in their own thinking, have a right to.

Can you hear the voice of the tempter today in all of this? Doesn't it sound almost verbatim from the Book of Genesis? 'Yes, that's what the church teaches, but do you really believe it? Seriously?' Yes, this is exactly the tempter's voice here and now planting seeds of doubt so that we can begin to think that maybe God is being unreasonable, at least in some ways unrealistic, or at least that he could not have possibly been serious when his son founded his church as his body and his bride to guide us into the way of all truth. These are the temptations we face and this is the strategy the evil one uses to lure us into sinning deeper and deeper until he gets to his ultimate goal, worship of him, not God, and he is a very jealous, evil genius. So thank God and the Church for this season of Lent, this period of purification and intense retraining in the life of Christian discipleship.

We have our three traditional Lenten practices. We hear our Lord exhorting us to that in the Gospel we hear on Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, from the Sermon on the Mount. And all of these practices are really the antidote to what tries to lure us away from the Lord, from a disordered and frenzied indulgence in pleasure, pride, and greed.

First of all, the practice of fasting. Fasting helps us to keep in check the immoderate use of pleasure, in a way using it in a way that is contrary to God's will, feeling that penance, willful depriving ourselves of some even legitimate pleasure, we feel that in our body, corporal penance, in order to strengthen us against temptations to lust and gluttony in all of their forms.

The practice of prayer, which helps us keep in check the immoderate use of whatever power God has entrusted to us. He's given all some kind of power or authority to some degree even within the family structure. And so prayer strengthens us against that temptation to pride, for true prayer always consists of humbly submitting ourselves in obedience to God's will.

And finally, almsgiving and other works of charity. These help to keep in check the immoderate use of wealth and all material goods. Again, we feel that in a very concrete way when we are generous with our time, talent, and treasure, and so it strengthens us against the temptation to greed and instead helps instill within us that virtue of generosity.

This is how we make of our Lent a 40 day retreat with our Lord in the desert. We don't retreat literally to - geographically into the desert, because we remain in the world in our day to day busy lives, but we retreat with him interiorly, in a spiritual sense, by stripping away any distraction or pursuit that might compete for the undivided attention we owe him. We focus on that in a very intense, intentional way. This, though, these practices, are not limited to Lent. They acquire a certain intensity and a certain type of a focus during Lent, but it's to help strengthen us to practice these virtues all throughout the year, indeed, all throughout our lives because this is the life of Christian discipleship

And so Lent is kind of a retraining in that school of discipleship. Some of you are going through that training for the first time, our dear catechumens who will soon be Elect, and it is thanks to your brothers and sisters who have taken their Christian discipleship seriously and put it into practice. You're all here because your lives have in some way or another been touched by a brother or sister in the faith, who reached out and invited you to an encounter with the one who truly loves us, our Lord Jesus Christ. What we see today are the fruits of an authentically lived Christian discipleship. So I want to take this opportunity to thank you all, pastors, catechists, sponsors, all of you in our parishes, who are witnesses to the love and goodness of Jesus Christ, and we see the fruits of the proclamation of the good news tonight.