

1st Sunday of Lent, C

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

So, here is what I wonder. What if Jesus had said, **“Ok. Yes, I will do it?”** What if he had turned just one small stone into a loaf of bread? He is hungry. Why not fill the emptiness? Not a feast or even a big loaf. No butter. Just a little something to get him by. What if he had accepted the glory and authority of all the kingdoms of the world? They are rightfully his anyway. Why not free fall into the arms of the angels? After all, he is the beloved son.

What if Jesus had said, **“Ok. Yes, I will do it?”** Would Jesus have been less beloved? Would he have no longer been God’s Son? Would Jesus have been a failure? Those sound like questions of idle curiosity, speculations, but they are not. Jesus may not have said, **“Ok. Yes, I will do it,”** but I have. Maybe you have as well.

Sometimes we hunger for attention, acceptance, approval. Each of us, I suspect, knows the hole and emptiness of restlessness, boredom, and that sense that we are going nowhere, and life has no meaning. No, we have not turned a stone into a piece of bread, but we have likely filled our emptiness and fed our hunger with something less than life-giving, something other than what we know God would want for us. We only wanted something to get us by, fill the hole, and satisfy the hunger. But it doesn’t. It never does. It only gets us to the next fix.

Other times we know better, but we don't do better. We take the easy way out. We do less than we want to do. We take a shortcut through life. It's easy to justify. Everyone does it. No one got hurt. I deserve it. The ends justify the means. No one knew.

Then there are the times we negotiate with God. Have you ever thought or perhaps prayed, **“If you love me, if you are the God, I want you to be, then catch me, give me, do for me?”**

Jesus' temptations in the wilderness are not all that different from our temptations. The wilderness is not so much a place as a situation. Like Jesus, we are sometimes left alone with our thoughts. Who am I? What is my life about? How will I get through this? In the wilderness, there will always be a voice that is quick to offer an answer, an idea, a way. Jesus was tempted in every way, as are we.

The difference is that Jesus said, **“No,”** and sometimes we have said, **“Ok. Yes, I will do it.”** At that moment, are we less beloved of God? Are we somehow less God's son or daughter? Are we a failure? Turn the questions around. If we had said, **“No,”** would we be more beloved? More God's child? Would we have passed and be a spiritual success?

That duality between good and bad, right and wrong, passing and failing often underlies our understanding of temptation. Temptations are seen as God's pop quiz. The test has been distributed. God waits for the results, and we wait for a grade. This idea of scorekeeping by God and

us is, I think, what sometimes gives Lent a bad reputation and tends to keep us stuck. Today's gospel offers the way forward.

Every year, on the First Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of Jesus' temptations. The dust of Ash Wednesday has become the sand of the desert, the wilderness, the place of temptation. We are brought face to face with the temptations of our lives. So, how do we understand them?

Let's start with Jesus. He is baptized and immediately goes to the wilderness where he is tempted. At his baptism the Spirit descended upon him and the heavenly voice declared, **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."** That's the reality even before the temptation, before the results are in. That's the reality for us as well. The relationship has already been established. Grace always precedes temptation.

Whether Jesus said yes or no did not determine his sonship, belovedness, or how pleased God was. The temptations and struggles in the desert did not determine how God would know Jesus; instead, they determined how Jesus would know himself. In struggling with his temptations, Jesus began to know himself to be filled with and led by the Spirit. The voice that spoke from without at his baptism was interiorized and spoke from the depths of his being.

Jesus' wilderness experience and learning confirmed his baptism. He will declare this in his first public teaching. He comes out of the desert, goes to his hometown synagogue, and reads from Isaiah, **"The Spirit of**

the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor....” Then he tells the crowd, **“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**

The temptations were not a pass-fail exam but information that let Jesus understand himself. That’s what they are for us as well. Every temptation is the opportunity to rediscover, affirm, and claim our identity as a beloved child of God, in whom he is well pleased.

The temptations did not establish Jesus’ sonship; they helped reveal and confirm it. The temptations did not overcome his sonship; his sonship overcame the temptations. It is the same for us. If that is Jesus’ way, then it is also our way.

Our responses to the temptations of life, whether **“yes”** or **“no,”** tell us something about ourselves. They offer information about who and whose we believe ourselves to be. They reveal where we place our trust, how we see the world, and how we behave toward others. In facing our temptations, we discover our true hunger and emptiness. We find out where it hurts and see how we act out of our wounds. We discover our weaknesses. We can become awakened and self-aware.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With each temptation, we learn more about ourselves, which is essential information. All of this offers an opportunity for a new life and a new way of being beloved children of God. Treatment and healing can only ever happen after the diagnosis has been made. There is no

salvation without temptation. You could say we are tempted into salvation. **Amen.**