

First Sunday of Lent Year C, 2025

Dt 26:4-10 Rom 10:8-13
Ps 91 Lk 4:1-13

Empty belly; full heart: self-denial and temptations

The gospel for the first Sunday of Lent starts off with Jesus finishing a forty-day fast, at the end of which, the gospel recounts, “he was hungry.” Jesus persevered in his fast for forty days. We are, what, four or five days into Lent, and we’re as likely as not to have already stumbled in our penances.

But now is not the time to throw up our hands in surrender and just give up and give in. Now is the time, with humility, to recognize and to remember that we are but clay, dust, ashes, who have no strength to call our own. Now is the time to surrender our pretensions to power and strength and to allow God to be at work within us. “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*” (Lk 23:46).

Can there be some spiritual benefit to failing at our penances, or to performing them poorly or with difficulty? Yes, *for God all things are possible* (Mt 19:26; Mk 10:27, 14:36). If, before my penitential “failures,” I’m open to a hard lesson about myself, I’ll learn humility. It is humiliating to realize that when I resolve to deny myself some small thing, even for a day or so, I find myself obsessing about it nearly the whole time. This is a common experience. And when I fail in my simple resolutions, I come to realize how little I can trust myself, how little I can rely on my own resolve and determination. If I cannot hold firm in this little thing, how is it that I am so self-

assured in so many other things, so confident in my strength, my own know-how, my own views even? Is my self-confidence even warranted or is it arrogance, pride? I thought I could do this, no problem, easy-peasy. But it's harder than I thought. What else am I deceiving myself about? What else is my unwarranted self-confidence blinding me to?

In coming to this kind of humility, there is strength, because I am now open to God's working in me, to the gifts of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom that the Holy Spirit wishes to bestow on me. "*I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me*" (Phil 4:13), but only when I allow his strength, and not mine (which is only weakness), to be at work in me.

Now, if we can find some spiritual benefit in *failing* at our penances, then surely there must be some equal or greater benefit in *persevering* in them, even despite temporary setbacks. By fasting, for a short time, we deny the body not only its comforts and conveniences, but also its needs. The body will want to rebel, but we hold firm. And this is the power in such fasting: as the body is for a short time denied, the spirit is affirmed and grows stronger. This is the grace we are seeking. Fasting, you see, is much more than a physical undertaking. It is a spiritual exercise. By fasting – here we understand any penance – we exercise the spirit and grow spiritual "muscles."

Then why do we, even though we want so much to grow in our spiritual lives, ignore the ancient wisdom of self-denial? A wisdom that can be expressed in four short words: *empty belly; full heart*. We want the full heart, but we fear the empty belly. And by empty belly, let us understand, yes, physical hunger, but also any other kind of self-imposed “deprivation” or self-denial, when we willingly and freely (and resolutely) choose to abstain from food or noise or activity or busyness or whatever.

If we cannot (or will not) say no to ourselves in these small acts of self-denial, how will we ever say no to the devil, whose temptations are far greater than our bodies’ inclination to sweets or alcohol or television or social media, or whatever else we are trying to “give up”? And so, we have to look at our Lenten penances, our fasting, as a way to train not only our bodies, but mostly our spirits, which are trained *through* the body and its senses. For the spiritual combat that lies ahead – which each of us will undoubtedly face in life, and perhaps several times – learning to say no to the body and its demands, starting in small things and in small doses, is necessary if we want to be victorious over the devil and his temptations. If I cannot resist the temptations of my own weak flesh, how will I fare before the devil’s temptations, whose power is far beyond my own?

And this takes us to consider briefly the three temptations of Jesus in today’s gospel. The first and third temptations are similar. In them, the devil tempts Jesus to force God to act in order to spare his physical life. In the first temptation, the devil approaches Jesus when

he is exceedingly hungry and weak from his fast and urges him to force God to turn stones into bread, thereby preserving his physical life from hunger. But Jesus is not deceived, and he quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3: *“one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the LORD.”* Jesus does not fear the “empty belly.”

In the third temptation, the devil tempts Jesus to force God to intervene and spare his physical life by throwing himself from the heights of the temple. But again, Jesus is not deceived, and he quotes, again, from Deuteronomy 6:16: *“You shall not put the LORD, your God, to the test.”* Jesus has a “full heart,” full of trust in his Father’s plan and providence. How could he then test the Father, when his heart is full of the Father’s love? Jesus needs no proof, no sign, and no test will demonstrate or confirm what he already knows and has: a heart full of his Father’s love.

Both of these temptations point us to the crucifixion, when Jesus freely and willingly offered his physical life in total trust and surrender to his Father. Hungering in the desert, teetering at the top of the temple, Jesus would not use divine power to serve or to save himself, however much the evil one tempted him. Rather, on the cross, Jesus would reveal the depth of his abandonment: *“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”* (Lk 23:46). Into your hands, Father, I surrender my life, my hope, my dreams, my people, my country, my friends, my enemies, my family, everything that I have and all that I

am, I surrender it to you. On the cross, Jesus emptied his belly. In the resurrection, his heart was made full. Empty belly; full heart.

The second temptation of Jesus is different. This time, it is not his physical life that is at stake, but his spirit: his mind, heart, and soul. The devil tempts Jesus with “power and glory.” He can have all the power and glory of all *the kingdoms of the world*, past, present, and future, shown to him *in a single instant*. All the power and glory of the world, to use as he sees fit, for good, for holiness, for righteousness! But the problem – and this is what the evil one would have us overlook – is that all this *power and glory has been handed over to him*. The devil has covered with his slime everything that belongs to the world – power, glory, money, authority, wealth, status, influence, and so on.

The temptation here is *not* to worship the devil, but to think that we can wield the power and glory *of the world* for the good. But once we lay our hands on it, the devil’s slime makes it impossible for us to handle it, and we find ourselves duped, deceived, betrayed ... by a foolish and unwarranted overconfidence in our own strength and ability. Satan holds out the *power and glory* of the world as something that could be used for good, hoping that Jesus (and we) will be foolish enough not pay attention to his disclaimer and disclosure: that it has all been handed over to the devil, which means that it is covered in his slime.

So this is the temptation. And it is bait for fools. But Jesus is not deceived by the devil's offer, and he will not pay the asking price for this bad bargain. He will not worship or serve the devil for even a mere instant so as to gain... what, the world, but lose his spirit, his mind, heart, and soul, his life, in the bargain? No, indeed. And we should learn from the Master's example and follow him in both our words and our actions.

Jesus having thus been tempted, this episode of St Luke's gospel ends with foreboding words: *the devil ... departed from him for a time*. For a time. A reminder that until the day we die, temptations, and the tempter, are never far off, ready to appeal to our fears (the empty belly), to our pride (worldly power and glory), or to our doubts (testing God). Engaged as we are in spiritual combat, we must *be sober and alert, ready to resist the devil, his lies and treacheries, steadfast in faith* (1 Pt 5:8-9). To build up our holy resistance, we turn to the practices of self-denial, as modeled for us by Jesus in his forty-day desert fast, so that by our empty bellies, our hearts may be made full.

And even if we have already faltered, we nonetheless set our failings aside, along with any discouragement, and start again, reassured in the knowledge that *God is always at our side, with rod and staff that give us courage* (Ps 23:4), and that *if we cling to him, he will deliver us; and when we call upon him, he will answer us* (Ps 91:14-15).

Lent has only just begun. So take courage. Be stouthearted. And trust in the Lord! (Ps 27:14).