

Lent 1, Year C

Friday night Rose and I were walking through Wayne with the girls, glancing in the windows as we walked by each shop, when all of a sudden something caught my preacher's eye.

In one of the gift shops on the Southside of Lancaster Ave. was this little doodad with one of those cute sayings on it. The saying was "I feel a sin coming on."

Isn't that something? "I feel a sin coming on." It makes sin sound something like a cold. Just rest, drink lots of fluids and in 3 days your sin should be gone.

Well, as cute as I found the saying, we all know that's not how sin works. At its most basic level, sin is a choice we make, not a germ we pick up. On a more subtle level, sin is an attitude we possess which gives rise to a certain kind of behavior. Sin is the expression of our darker motivations.

It is usually the result of putting ourselves before God or others, the decision to go for instant gratification instead of considering what is really best, or the repetition of some long ingrained behavior that we know is bad for us but we feel powerless to combat.

But whatever our particular sins tend to be, there is usually a moment of pause that stands between us and them, a moment known best by the word "temptation."

Now, there are two basic attitudes towards temptation which are common to most people. The first comes from the Lord's Prayer itself: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The second is a saying from the playwright Oscar Wilde, who said that the only way to eliminate temptation is to yield to it! Which is something that we probably do more than we admit to.

The first we can call 'avoidance' and the second we can call 'indulgence.' The first is understandable but sometimes unrealistic, the

second is pleasurable but can get us into a lot of trouble. It's as if we try to avoid, avoid, avoid, avoid, avoid, but then with a gasp of exasperation we eventually say, "alright I'll do it."

However, there is a third option which is actually buried in the original meaning of the word "temptation."

But rather than simply give it to you, allow me to tell you how this truth came back to me. Over the last 3 years I have received an entire education through reading stories to Elsa. The world of children's literature is an exercise of embedding truths in simple stories, and as odd as it may sound, the story which came to mind as I pondered the meaning of temptation is one called "We're going on a Bear Hunt."

Do you know it? It's one you actually sing and it goes like this: "We're going on a bear hunt, we're going to catch a big one, it's a beautiful day, we're not scared!"

"Uh oh, Long wavy grass! We can't go over it, we can't go under it, oh no! We've got to go through it!"

Then back to the chorus about going on a bear hunt, followed by selective verses about obstacles they encountered, A cold river, thick oozy mud, a big dark forest, (you'll love this one) a swirling snow storm, then finally the narrow gloomy cave, where they find the bear. Each of these verses repeats the line; "we can't go over it, we can't go under it, oh no! We've got to go through it!"

And that, my brothers and sisters, is both the original meaning hidden within the word "temptation" and the third option for how to deal with it.

The English word "temptation" is a translation of a Greek word which comes from the root "per" which means "to pass through, to get through." We can't go over it, we can't go under it, oh yes, we have to go through it, and by God's Grace we will.

We probably think that temptation means something like “to entice,” kind of like we feel a sin coming on, but in it’s earliest sense it was more like what we saw with Jesus in today’s gospel lesson. It was something he had to go through.

And if we want we can go back and forth about whether, as God’s Son, he was really as tempted, as enticed, as we poor human creatures are. But I find it very helpful to re-imagine temptation in that earlier meaning as something we have to go through.

Because it is not like a cold that comes upon us. Instead temptation is more analogous to a mood; they come and they go, but they do not need to overpower us and they are not permanent.

And so, while avoiding temptation is fine when possible, and forgiveness is readily available when we yield to it, a good measure of our spiritual growth is whether we have learned or are learning the third option, which is simply to go through it, acknowledge the evil one’s presence, but as with a bad mood, do something to change our focus.

Because regardless of whether the goal is to catch a bear or mature as a Christian, we can’t go over it, we can’t go under it, but we can go through it, and by God’s Grace, we will.
Amen.