

Homily: 1st Sunday of Lent: Cycle B: 2024: Gen 9: 8-15; Ps. 25; 1 Pet 3: 18-22; Mk 1: 12-15

“Repent and Believe in the Gospel”

1. As we move through the early part of the Lenten season, it is a good time to remind ourselves what the purpose of this season is: to repent of our sins and selfishness and **to be transformed more deeply in holiness**, to allow the Holy Spirit to mold us into the image of Jesus increasingly, for the glory of Our Loving Father in Heaven, and for the good both of our own souls and for the people around us. Today I would like to focus on the role of extra prayer and penance in helping to bring this transformation about.
2. Hopefully all of us have made some serious Lenten resolutions to help us grow spiritually. The first part of this should be doing something extra to grow closer to God. To make an honest evaluation of our spiritual life by looking at what we are currently doing or not doing, and then, with God’s ever-present grace, putting into practice **something more**, spiritually speaking. This is manifested in the following ways: *be it coming to daily Mass, which is a particularly beautiful Lenten sacrifice, more frequent reception of the Sacrament of Confession (coming back to Confession if it’s been a long time – would be the ultimate Lenten gift, or making an appointment to make a General Confession of your whole life, if you want to really get serious about the Catholic spiritual life, as the Saints recommend we do at some point in our life), coming to the Stations of the Cross, praying more, especially the Rosary and Divine Mercy Chaplet, doing spiritual reading and meditation on the Sacred Scriptures, the Catechism, the lives of the saints, or other holy Catholic books (in that regard, check out our Parish lending library - always getting bigger and better).* Lent is a time to re-prioritize spiritually and once again to put God at the center of our lives, or maybe for the first time. If we don’t pray and commune with God, we spiritually die; just as if we didn’t have oxygen to breathe, we would physically die. **Are we giving God our best in this regard?** If we get into some good habits spiritually this Lent, hopefully it will carry over into the rest of our lives, outside of Lent.

3. Another aspect of Lent is giving up things. This is what we usually think of in relation to Lent. But remember the first Lenten exercise of praying more is the necessary foundation for our acts of self-denial to truly help transform us in Christ; without the prayer foundation, our acts of self-denial will not change us long term - which is the true goal of Lent. **Why are we called to practice acts of self-denial?** To both make **reparation** for our past sins and **to die** to our fallen nature which lives as if God doesn't really exist (practical atheism - Pope St. JPII called it), and to grow more fully in the image of Jesus, in relation to *His self-giving love, his patience, his love for His Father shown in a life of total obedience to His holy will (see the Agony in the Garden – not my will but your holy will be done), and from that His desire to bring others into that eternal embrace of Love and Truth.* If we forget **the truth** that giving up things in Lent or any time during the year are for the real purpose of molding our minds, hearts and wills into conformity with Christ, our acts of penance whatever they are: *giving up or putting limits on television, and/or the internet, videogames, smart phones, not eating between meals, fasting from gossiping, or giving up other things,* will become **a great burden**, and, in fact, we may not be very successful in keeping our resolutions throughout Lent.; **we may have already given up** a few days in – like we often do with New Year's resolutions! And if we do somehow **“get through Lent,”** it won't have much lasting impact on our spiritual life; and after Lent we will just go back to our old practices of living. Not good. It's only if we root our Lenten penitential practices in **prayer** and wanting to grow in **love** for God and neighbor that our acts of self-denial will truly accomplish their goal which is: *to help us to detach our hearts from the passing things of this world, to enable us to focus better on the eternal realities of God and our Catholic Faith; to prepare us in Jesus to fight the spiritual battle against our weak fallen human nature: which likes to take the path of least resistance; the temptations of the world and the devil; to strengthen our wills to actual choose what is good and holy more consistently, than just wanting to do so in our minds.* **This is a time to get re-focused like a 40-day retreat:** a time to reflect and change, so that we are focused for the rest of the year, to be better followers of Christ day in and day out. God bless you. ✚