

**First Sunday of Lent – Year C  
6 March 2022**

**“The devil departed from Him until an opportune time”**

**Five years ago, Tom Brady led the New England Patriots to the greatest comeback in Super Bowl history. Trailing 28-3 with less than three minutes remaining in the third quarter, the Patriots scored 25 straight points to tie the game, 28-28, with just 57 seconds left in regulation. New England then won the coin toss in overtime, and went 75 yards in eight plays to score the winning touchdown.**

**Needless to say, Brady’s skill as a quarterback was essential in orchestrating that stunning comeback. Perhaps as important as talent, however, was that he had the confidence, even the arrogance, to believe that he actually could come back from such a deficit to win the game. In today’s Gospel, Satan seems to demonstrate that very attitude. Now, let me be clear. I’m not saying that Tom Brady is the devil incarnate, but, like Brady, the devil does not seem to be discouraged or dissuaded from his agenda by a seemingly hopeless situation. Against all odds, we find Satan in the desert trying to tempt the Son of God into sin. Talk about chutzpah!**

**Our gospel passage today actually tells us a lot about the devil. Through his words and actions, he reveals several important attributes. First, he is extremely arrogant. His ego was so enormous that he led an unsuccessful revolt against God himself, and in today’s Gospel, he launches a new campaign, this time specifically against the Son of God. His ego is so immense that failure doesn’t seem to discourage him at all. In that respect, he’s like a defensive back, who is coached to have a “short memory.” If he gets burned on one play, he just forgets about it,**

and gets ready for the next one. Typically, NFL quarterbacks complete more than half of their pass attempts, which means that pass defenders *lose* most of the time. Yet they keep coming back for more, confident that they'll disrupt the next attempt. Satan, the great disruptor, does the very same.

That arrogant tenacity is also part of the second attribute revealed in today's Gospel—the devil is persistent. He doesn't give up easily. After failing to get Jesus to sin on three consecutive tries, Satan is forced to punt. But ominously, Scripture notes that “when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.” *For a time...* almost like Satan and his team of demons going into the locker room at half-time to plot and revise their game plan.

And Satan is quite good at changing his approach; he shows tactical flexibility. He doesn't try the same failed approach over and over again; instead, he adapts and improvises. When his appeal to Jesus' hunger after the 40-day fast fails to get our Lord to sin, Satan abandons physical seductions and turns to a psychological one—tempting Jesus with unlimited power. When that fails, he switches to a third approach, an explicitly spiritual one, encouraging Jesus to throw himself from the parapet of the temple and simply “trust” that his heavenly Father will save him.

In addition to attacking from a different angle each time, the devil demonstrates his flexibility here in another way. Realizing that Jesus rebuffed his first two temptations by quoting Scripture, Satan then tempts him by using that very same weapon against him. This is much like a coach using his opponents' strengths against them. For example, against a team with aggressive pass rushers, a coach will often resort to

screen passes or draw plays to sucker defensive lineman into charging too hard up-field. In our Gospel passage, Satan tries to sucker Jesus into sin by using his strength against him. In other words, Satan tries to tempt Jesus—the Word of God—by *using* the Word of God. Our Lord doesn't fall for it, and he rebukes the devil by again quoting Scripture, “You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” Forced to acknowledge the superiority of his foe, Satan limps off, licking his wounds, but vowing to himself to fight again another day.

So, why have I focused so much on the devil's plots and plans? Because he'll use these same tricks against us this Lent. Father David has challenged us to intentionally and conscientiously grow in our prayer lives during this penitential season, because without a vibrant prayer life, we cannot have a dynamic and life-giving relationship with God. Such a relationship with the Almighty is the last thing Satan wants to see. So we should expect him to fight back by tempting us to lose our resolve, falter in our Lenten commitments, wrestle with the resulting shame, and then abandon our efforts at spiritual growth. But, let's not take his temptations lying down. Just like any team taking the field, we need to prepare ourselves to take on our adversary.

To do that, we should steal a few pages from the devil's playbook, take a few of the devil's strengths and make them our own. What do I mean by that? Well, we noted that Satan seems confident, persistent, and tactically flexible in his efforts to do evil. We should use those same attributes in our fight to do good. Consider that first one, confidence—or as we noted in Satan's case, extreme arrogance. In the face of temptation, we should be just as confident, if not more so. Why? Because through Jesus' Cross and Resurrection, victory has already

been assured. But here's the paradox. Unlike Satan, who is consumed by his ego, we best prepare ourselves to share in Christ's victory by crucifying our egos, putting them to death. Our confidence in victory is most powerful when we demonstrate total and complete humility before the Lord. We are strongest when we kneel before the Cross and acknowledge our weakness and failures. As St. Paul said, "For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Today's responsorial psalm has a similar message. When the man in distress prays, "Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble," God says of him, "Because he clings to me, I will deliver him...He shall call upon me, and I will answer him." Moses has the same message in our passage from Deuteronomy: "When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us...we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry...[and] brought us out of Egypt." Moses then insists, that in gratitude for the Lord's mercy, the people should "bow down in [God's] presence." When we do that, when we bow down and humble ourselves, when we admit our dependence upon God, and cry out to him, he then empowers us to confidently, almost arrogantly, boast and find strength in *His* saving power, thereby resisting Satan's temptations.

As we saw in the Gospel, Satan is not just arrogant; he is also persistent, and he will persistently attack us this Lent. Therefore, we must be just as persistent in our resistance and counter-attacks. That doesn't mean we won't occasionally fail. In fact, let me make a near iron-clad prediction—regardless of the resolve and dedication of your Lenten prayer efforts, you *are* occasionally going to fail; you're going to stumble and fall. All of us do; all of us will—that's a guarantee.

**But we don't let one small defeat decide the game. If you're the quarterback and fail to get 10 yards on first down, you don't just throw up your hands and say, "Well, we might as well punt right now!" Instead, you resolve to do the best you can on the next few plays. If you're a defensive back who just gave up a touchdown, you don't go to the bench and moan, "I quit." Instead, you come back determined to make an interception the next time. The same applies to our Lenten discipline of prayer. If you're tempted to miss a daily prayer, or you cut it short for some other "priority," or even if you get out of the rhythm of daily prayer altogether, get back on the field and take charge. Don't let the inevitable small failures dissuade you from getting right back into the game. When Jesus rejected Satan's temptations, Satan didn't just give up. Instead, he left to regroup, looking for another opportunity to tempt the Lord. So, when you have a temporary setback, immediately regroup, and find another opportunity to pray. As St. Paul insists, "Pray without ceasing. In all circumstance, give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:17-18). We can pray persistently and confidently because, as St. Paul said elsewhere, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31).**

**Finally, we must demonstrate tactical flexibility in our Lenten prayer life. We can do that in two ways. First, take advantage of the wonderful riches of Catholic prayer. There are so many ways to pray. We have Eucharistic adoration, the divine office, *lectio divina*, the rosary, the divine mercy chaplet. We can pray alone or in community; we can pray silently, in spoken words, or in song. We can offer prayers of petition, thanksgiving, praise or intercession. If one type or style of prayer is proving difficult or unhelpful, don't be afraid to try another.**

**Like a defensive coach who mixes up his pass coverages and blitz packages, don't be bashful about mixing up your prayer life to create a more powerful and spiritually appropriate path forward.**

**We also demonstrate tactical flexibility when we don't limit our approach to prayer to a single part of who we are but rather commit our entire selves to the effort. When we pray with our entire being, the different parts of who we are support and reinforce one another. So, pray with the whole package—all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength. Because our relationship with God is the most important one we'll ever have, that relationship demands that we bring everything to it. So, pray with your A-game and leave everything on that praying field!**

**Finally, keep in mind that all of the skill, persistence, confidence, and tactical flexibility in the world will never do you much good unless you've got a good game plan. That's why Fr. David and Kevin Sullivan are encouraging us to prepare a game plan for Lenten prayer; you can find a template for that plan on the back of Father's Lenten letter to all parishioners. If you haven't already filled it out, I encourage you to do so by writing down specifically how you're going to approach the 1% challenge. Jesus had a plan—he spent 40 days in the desert in prayer and fasting to strengthen himself for his ministry and his battle against the devil. Satan also pretty clearly had a plan, one he was willing to adjust, but not give up on, after a setback. If we want to be on the winning team and march to victory with Jesus Christ, then we need a plan, too. So plan your prayer life this Lent, and then follow that plan. May your Lenten efforts bring you ever closer to our Lord and**

**Savior—renewed, refreshed, and ready to celebrate his Resurrection at Easter.**