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1Lent – Year A Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11;

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Back in the day when I had a newspaper column called "The Anti-Fan," I remember writing one about athletes who allowed themselves to get bumped off their games by their opponents. This can happen a variety of ways: physically — a push, a shove, a trip when the official isn't looking — or verbally with an insult or an insinuation or a piece of disinformation.

A classic example of this was in the 2006 World Cup when the French star Zidane reacted to something an Italian opponent said about his sister by head butting the man, resulting in his being thrown from the game, thereby all but assuring an Italian victory.

When I was growing up, people who tried to get under an opponent's skin were called bench jockeys. Today, they're called trash talkers. But the intent is the same: Divert your opponent from his or her purpose.

In the story from Genesis, the serpent doesn't insult Adam and Eve but with a few well-chosen words he does manage to get their minds off obeying God and onto the idea of their becoming like God.

Bad things happen for them.

In the Gospel story, the devil, hoping for bad things to happen for the human race, tries to talk Jesus off his game, off his designated reason for being in the world.

He first tries this by trying to play on Jesus' physical state — having fasted for 40 days, Jesus is hungry. Satan proposes to Jesus a solution: Use your power to turn stones into bread.

Jesus refuses, quoting Deuteronomy as he does so: “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

One day, when faced with 5,000 of hungry mouths, Jesus will use his power to make bread, from stones, if you will. But that will be out of compassion for others, not to please himself. For himself, he will trust God to provide, and God does.

The last line of today’s Gospel passage says angels came and ministered to Jesus, and the language that is used there suggests his being fed.

The devil will try again.

So, if you trust God so much, he says, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Great Temple, After all, and here he quotes Psalm 91, “‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

But Jesus answers him, again with Scripture, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In other words, what kind of faith doubts God and insists he do one miracle after another. Genuine faith means trusting that God will be there for you when you genuinely need him, not to get you out of a situation artificially created as a test.

You’ll notice that throughout this passage, Satan begins each sentence with a gibe: “IF you are the son of God,” he says. “IF you are the son of God, do this and this and this.”

That’s a form of trash talk, and it’s designed to provoke Jesus into making a bad decision. It’s designed to play on Jesus’ pride, and if anyone knows the destructive power of pride, it’s Satan.

But he’s misjudged his man. Jesus’ greatness is rooted not in pride, but in humility. So, the jibe, the taunt has no effect.

Defeated twice, Satan goes for the tried-and-true way to pry human beings away from God — the offer of power and riches. Look what you can have, he tells Jesus, if you just worship me.

At this point, I almost feel sorry for Satan. He’s offering Jesus baubles — things, things that perish — and all he asks in exchange is that Jesus give

up the only thing that really matters in life: Jesus' relationship with God, his relationship with the source of ALL life.

Satan discovers that Jesus will not be diverted from his purpose. He will not be thrown off his game. He is here — here on earth as a human being — for a reason.

We, his fellow humans, also are here for a reason: to love and serve God, to grow in knowledge of Him, to become more like Him, to be his hands and feet and heart in this broken and hurting world, but we're a little more susceptible to being diverted than he was.

And when we are diverted, we can tell ourselves, "Well, life is difficult, life is complex, we have many demands on our time." All of which may well be true.

That doesn't mean we should allow ourselves to be bumped off our game which, after all, isn't a game. It's our life. It's our reason for being. It's our purpose.

We've just begun the season of Lent, and Lent is a particularly good time to develop a Rule of Life, a spiritual discipline that helps keep us true to our purpose. It is meant to be fashioned with prayer and discernment, in partnership with God.

Steven Macchia, the author of a book titled, "Crafting a Rule of Life," compares a rule of life to a trellis, in that it both supports and guides. In his introduction, he notes that an ancient meaning for the word for rule denotes a railing or guidepost, something to hang onto in the dark.

Something to hang onto in the dark. That, to me, is a great definition of a rule of life.

The devil is a master of disinformation. You see it in the reading from Genesis where he misquotes what God said about eating from the trees in the Garden. You see it when he quotes Scripture to Jesus but does it in a way that distorts its meaning.

But where his disinformation works on Adam and Eve in the story in Genesis, it has no effect on Jesus, who, after all, knows the Word of God. A Rule of Life will always include a regular and healthy diet of God's Word, to help us deal with disinformation that comes our way from whatever source.

In today's psalm, God tells us,

I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; *
I will guide you with my eye.
Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; *
who must be fitted with bit and bridle,
or else they will not stay near you."

Jesus was here for a reason. We are here for a reason: again, that's to love and serve God, to grow in knowledge of Him, to become more like Him, to be his hands and feet and heart in this world. Our Lord was true to his purpose: Be true to yours.

Amen.