

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (Year A)
2-22-2026 Homily

I. Introduction

Once there was an immensely wealthy industrialist or businessman who succeeded in everything he tried; because of his great success, he was used to getting what he wanted—even if it meant bending the rules or using shady business tactics or intimidation. At one point he purchased a zoo—not for the public to visit, but to serve as his own personal nature preserve, accessible only to his family and his equally rich friends. He collected exotic animals from around the world, making it one of the finest and most complete zoos ever established. One day he heard of a rare and beautiful type of gazelle found only in Africa; it was so fast and difficult to capture that no zoo in the world had one in its collection. The industrialist was determined to acquire one, so he set out for Africa with a crew of hired men, even though the experts advised him he was wasting his time.

The industrialist had his men create a mixture of oats and barley, rolled in molasses—a type of sweet feed the gazelles would not be able to resist. This concoction was left in an open field, where the gazelles would be sure to find it at night—and they did find it, and completely devoured it. More of the sweet feed was left on the ground the next night, though this time the hired men left it near a fence post they installed in the ground. Every day another fence post was added, and every night the gazelles came for their tasty treat. Eventually boards were installed between the posts, leaving only a few openings—but the gazelles found their way inside the enclosure so as to enjoy their midnight snack. Finally, there was just one opening left—and after the herd of gazelles went inside, the work crew blocked the opening, allowing the industrialist to look over the captured herd the next day and select the animals he wanted for his zoo to be caught and shipped back to America. When someone later asked him how he knew how to capture the gazelles, he simply explained, “I treated them the way I treat people: I give them what they want, and in exchange they give me their freedom” (William J. Bausch, *The Story Revealed*, pp. 49-50). This is also how the devil works: when he tempts us, he is very sly, patient, and determined, offering us apparently wonderful things so as to deceive and ensnare us, and thus gain control of our souls. We cannot resist him on our own; only through God’s grace can we triumph in the spiritual war the enemy is waging against us.

II. Development

Some people claim the devil is merely a fantasy, or a medieval fairy tale, or an invention of the Church designed to make it easier to control people. Based on today’s Gospel, however, it’s obvious Jesus would disagree. Beginning with the first human beings, satan had great success in deceiving humanity, making sin look attractive and beneficial, as we see in the 1st Reading. St. Paul tells us in the Letter to the Romans that sin and death entered the world through the disobedience of one man, Adam, thereby enslaving all humanity. Jesus, however, came to undo this tragedy by perfectly obeying the will of His Heavenly Father. It was necessary for Him to be tempted by the evil one, so that, by successfully resisting, Our Lord might give us encouragement and an example to follow. Jesus would not consider anything against His Father’s will, and He refused to bargain with or debate the devil. Instead, He turned to prayer and relied on divine grace—and in this way He won the victory.

III. Conclusion

In one of the *God is Not Dead* movies, a quite worldly and prosperous businessman felt a mixture of pity and contempt for his very religious mother, who was in the Alzheimer's unit of a nursing home. On one of his infrequent visits, he mused aloud, "What different fates are ours: I have everything I want, and you have nothing." To his great shock, his mother's dementia momentarily disappeared, and in a very lucid voice she said, "That's how the devil works: he gives us a beautiful and comfortable cage, while letting us think we're in charge; then he suddenly slams the gate and locks it, and we have no way to escape."

God was speaking a profound truth through a simple, mentally-challenged woman—a truth her proud and spiritually blind son desperately needed to hear—though the movie didn't show whether he took these divinely-inspired words to heart. During this season of Lent, the Church proclaims a message of repentance to a world mired in sin—but far too often, this message is ignored, rejected, or treated with disdain and contempt. The very fact that we're here at Mass means we aren't responding to the Gospel in such a casual or disrespectful way—but that's no reason for self-satisfaction or complacency. The devil is very sly; if he can't tempt us in a direct or blatant manner, he'll be much more subtle and indirect. For example, he likes to make religious people like us feel proud and self-righteous, so that we'll look down on others in a judgmental spirit. He also wants to make us complacent, thinking that we're already "holy enough," and therefore don't need to make any serious efforts to grow closer to God. When the Lord brings to mind one of our faults that we need to address, satan will suggest that it's just a little sin—especially in comparison to all those much bigger sins being committed all the time by irreligious or wicked people out there—so we don't really need to take God's warnings seriously. If we're still convinced we need to repent of a particular sin, and use the Lord's grace to overcome it, the evil one will shift gears and suggest to us, "Yes, that's true—but there's no rush; you have plenty of time to change your ways, so don't worry about it; everything's fine." Satan like to fence us in, one little fence post and section at a time—until before we know it, our sins and bad habits and worldly values have created a cage or pen from which it's very difficult to escape.

Lent is a time to take stock in this regard, honestly looking at our lives and, with God's help, carefully discerning whether there are things we need to change and priorities we need to adjust. Most of us are probably overdue for a "spiritual reality check," and that's what the Church is offering us—through Lenten daily reflection booklets, fasting and acts of penance, and opportunities for spiritual reading, attending daily Mass, Eucharistic Adoration, Stations of the Cross, examining our consciences, and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It's a sad and potentially tragic truth that much of humanity is, in varying degrees, under satan's control and quite possibly heading for eternal damnation. The Lord gives us these forty days not only to ensure we're not numbered among them, but to offer our prayers and sacrifices so that as many people as possible may escape from the devil's snares and traps. Jesus gave His life for this goal—and if we are truly His followers, it should be one of our priorities, too.

