How many people here have decided on a Lenten observance or have given something up for Lent? We are five days into Lent and I’ve got to ask how those observances are going so far? But we should ask ourselves why we are doing this in the first place? Because we should; because it’s good; because we need help in overcoming vices or things in our lives in need of change? Maybe. I think it is sometimes easier to do these things, or avoid other things, when we put them in the context of a religious observance such as Lent. But today is Sunday and that means that technical today falls outside of the Forty Days of Lent which some people use as a day of rest from their Lenten observances or an opportunity to take a break from the things they’ve given up; sound familiar to anyone??? Technically you can you know! I’m not suggesting, encouraging, nor discouraging you do this; it’s none of my business but what I have just done is tempt you. It’s up to you to decide what to do. Our readings today might help though. They speak to us about facing temptation, serving God and calling upon His protection, help and guidance and most of the time, this is what we need more than anything.

This first Sunday of Lent challenges us to face the ever-looming specter of temptation. From the mundane forms of temptation that make us want a cookie or ANOTHER cookie when we know we shouldn’t, to the more dubious forms that force us to decide whether or not to cheat, steal, lie or make some other sort serious morally bad decision and everything in between. Temptation is always around us forcing us to make a decision regardless of how, when or where we encounter it. If we let our guard down or aren’t prepared or properly informed, we can very quickly succumb to temptation and easily erode our spiritual lives. However, if we see temptation as an opportunity to choose what is good for us or an opportunity to choose God, then the option to do what is right seems more easy to discern and act on. A very wise Jewish baker put it to me this way, “It’s never wrong to do the right thing.” If we seek to strive for what is right throughout our lives, then we take the sting out of temptation and it becomes much less to fear.

We see this very clearly in our Gospel today. Jesus is beginning his public ministry by retreating to the desert for 40 days, the biblical code for preparation, to fast, pray and face the onslaught of the devil’s temptation. As I’m sure we all know, loneliness, thirst and hunger all conspire to weaken our ability to fight off temptation. Jesus was not an exception to this. Though he was the Word incarnate, second person of the Divine Trinity and the Son of God, Jesus was not immune to and did not overcome these temptations because of His Divine Nature but rather overcame them by means of His human will. A will that was completely aligned with that of the Father and a human will that we possess and share with Him. This gospel is showing us a model of our own capacity to overcome temptation in our lives. It is also showing us that the source of our ability to overcome temptation resides in God the Father who will deliver us in our time of need out of Love for us. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, Amen.” This is what we ask for when we pray the Our Father and it is through prayer and worship that we are strengthened in this struggle.

We hear this also in the Responsorial Psalm. “Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.” This is a simple prayer for help and yet it is also an acknowledgement of the One who can truly help us in times of trouble. It continues, “He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in distress; I will deliver him and glorify him.” Of course we can see how the “he” in this verse can refer to Jesus but it is true for us as
well: if we acknowledge God as the source of all good and call upon Him in our time of need we will not only be delivered but glorified.

It is with this same honest humility and trust that Jesus faces His tempter and is victorious. In thanksgiving for this deliverance, Jesus offers himself as the “first fruits” to God in the manner that Moses explains to his people in the first reading from Deuteronomy. Jesus tells the devil that “man shall not live on bread alone,” yet He will soon offer himself as the Bread of Life precisely to sustain us for our eternal lives. Jesus didn’t accept the offer of all the kingdoms of the world because they will be given to him, by the Father who created them, because of the Love and obedience Jesus showed to the Father. And finally Jesus didn’t need the help of angels to avoid harm or death in order to save his life but instead willfully and lovingly gives himself over to torture and death of His own accord in order to save OUR lives. The Tempter is vanquished by Faith, Trust and Obedience to God who promises to deliver us out of Love, not gain!

Overcoming temptation is a choice and an opportunity to CHOOSE what is right and good. The things that tempt us can certainly be obstacles to holiness but they can also be a means to holiness as well. Eating a cookie that we’ve given up for Lent is not going to keep us from communion with God but if we look at AVOIDING eating the cookie that we gave up for Lent as a sacrifice of thanksgiving for all that God has done for us, then we can see the cookie as a means to holiness.

So as we continue through these 40 days of preparation this Lent let us take the time to reflect and pray on the trials and temptations that you face in your own lives and decide for yourselves whether they are obstacles to God or opportunities to choose Him. If we align our wills to that of Jesus and the Father, we can be assured that we will choose the “right thing” in order to be “delivered from temptation”! And as I mentioned before, “It’s never wrong to do the right thing!”