

In 1995 the cartoonist Bill Watterson decided he had run out of ideas. So after a 10-year run, Calvin and Hobbes, my favorite comic strip of all time was over. If you don't know about the cartoon, Calvin was the quintessential bad boy, six years old, outgoing, rambunctious, with absolutely no sense of restraint! He hadn't yet learned what not to do, so he was always in trouble. Hobbes was Calvin's stuffed toy tiger. In the real world of Calvin's parents, Hobbes was just a toy. But in Calvin's imaginary world, Hobbes was a real live tiger and Calvin's constant companion. Hobbes always had something to say to Calvin, and that something was always a little bit cynical, and a little bit sarcastic. But Hobbes was much more aware of the consequences of Calvin's actions, than Calvin was. So Hobbes brought something like an adult perspective into Calvin's make-believe world.

So why Calvin and Hobbes on the first Sunday in Lent? It's because of one particular comic strip where Calvin and Hobbes pointedly wonder about the devil and temptation. While walking across rocks in a small creek. Calvin turns to Hobbes the tiger and asks: Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of man? Hobbes stops mid-stream, and gazes off into space saying: I'm not sure that man needs the help! Hobbes then leaps ahead of Calvin who is left standing mid-stream, on a rock, with a puzzled look on his face saying to no one in particular: You just can't talk to animals about these things!

Crossing that creek and wondering about the state of humankind might be seen as a metaphor for our own lives. Like Calvin and Hobbes we jump from rock to rock, trying to keep our balance, all the while wondering why our world is so troubled. But sooner or later, we lose balance, miss the rock, and find ourselves in troubled waters. We might be in up to our ankles, or in up to our neck. Regardless of the depth, trouble is always around the corner. And there's a link between sin and trouble. Sometimes we rationalize our bad behaviors with a flippant - "the devil made me do it?" Really?? The devil may tempt us, but that's not sin. The sin comes when we willingly and knowingly act on temptation, whatever it may be. Maybe we act badly because we're like Calvin, overly rambunctious with no respect for higher authority, let alone any sense of decorum or restraint. Or maybe we claim ignorance and believe that our bad behaviors don't necessarily hurt anyone else. But down deep, we already know that's not true. Each and every one of us is responsible for our own actions. The truth is that we can choose to sin, or we can choose to reject sin. When we come to the sobering realization that the choice truly is ours, we just might find ourselves standing mid-stream, with a puzzled look on our face, wondering where to get help.

Our help is, and always has been, in the name of the Lord. That means as Christians we are bound to follow Christ's example to the best of our ability. And one way to do that is to place our selves in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, praying, fasting, and seeking God's will just as Jesus did. Indeed, that's what lent is all about! A 40-day journey in search of spiritual growth and renewal, the very same journey that allowed Jesus to fend off temptation and reject sin. How did that work for Jesus? First, Satan offers to satisfy Jesus' physical hunger. Jesus firmly rejects the offer. Next Satan taunts Jesus, ordering Him to prove he is the Son of God, by jumping off a mountain. Again Jesus firmly rejects the offer. Finally Satan offers Jesus political power over all nations, prompting Jesus' most forceful rejection saying: "Get away Satan." In today's gospel, Jesus shows us how to reject sin. And it's a relatively simple formula: "The Lord God alone shall you worship, and the Lord God alone shall you serve."

As we prepare the table on this first Sunday of Lent, take a few minutes and think about what tempts you. The important thing to keep in mind is how you typically respond. Even if you find yourself standing mid-stream, with a puzzled look on your face, wondering what that means for you, it's far from hopeless. Because our help is, and always has been, Jesus! No matter what tempts you, you can choose to sin, or you can choose to reject it. It's worth mentioning that sin is never a popular topic, and some religious authorities have even suggested that sin is increasingly misunderstood in our current secular culture. Perhaps the easiest way to define sin by saying that it's anything we do that severs our relationship God, with ourselves, or with others. In contrast, Jesus continually calls us to do just the opposite by building a right relationship with God, with ourselves, and with others. It's fundamentally easier than we think it. All we have to do is take Jesus' advice to heart. The Lord God alone shall you worship, and the Lord God alone shall you serve. So happy lent! All 40 days offer countless opportunities to love and serve the Lord.