

When we hear of demons and the devil such as in our Gospel from today, it can be tempting to reinterpret such passages so as to understand them only in a figurative way and suppose that demons aren't actually real. This is a temptation CS Lewis warns us of in his satirical novel "the Screwtape Letters." The novel takes the form of a series of letters from a senior demon called Screwtape to his nephew Wormword. Wormword has the job of tempting a human being who is referred to as the patient. Wormword's more experienced uncle gives advice on how this should be done. In one of the letters, Screwtape writes to his nephew:

*Our policy for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. Of course this has not always been so. But in the meantime, we must obey our orders. I do not think you will have much difficulty in keeping the patient in the dark. The fact that 'devils' are predominantly comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that he therefore cannot believe in you.*

Devils and demons though do exist. Satan's name is translated in Hebrew as "the accuser," and he wants to do anything to bring us away from God, as he was jealous humans were created in the first place. And it would seem that when you read through Genesis, he has quite a successful campaign in bringing people away from God, as you go from original disobedience and sin by disobeying God at the start to murder and war and every sin you can think of in just a few chapters.

The same is true in our lives too. A little temptation from the devil and his minions and what seems as just a little thing can quickly spiral out of control. But as we see in our Gospel today, there is a way out - and it is with the helping hand of Jesus, who calls us His friends, who shows us the way. Because despite the temptations He faces, He is undeterred in His mission to save us and redeem us. So, how do we open our eyes to that truth? How do we formulate a plan for battle? The answer is by realizing we have a sin addiction problem, and confronting the devil with our Lord head-on.

The thing with sin and struggle is it can just kind of creep in. But when we open our eyes to it's reality and to the reality of God's love, it can be overcome.

Take the story of Lisa Freter who became a practicing Christian, but battled an addiction. No one ever warned her that addiction could creep into her life. But it did, in 1975, with a headache.

Not too long after she and her husband Dave were married, she started getting excruciating migraine headaches. Always wanting to handle things alone, she tried, but got to the point where she had to see a doctor. For two years Lisa made the rounds of various doctors and a psychologist as well, who felt she had an anger problem. By this time the common medications for migraine had been prescribed for her, yet the searing pain continued. The doctors began shrugging her off as a nuisance—an unsolvable case.

Feeling desperate, Lisa begged the last one, “Please, can’t you help me! There must be something that will clear up this pain.”

She was a neurologist, and she devised for Lisa an experimental combination of prescription drugs that included a narcotic painkiller, a tranquilizer, an antidepressant and an anti-inflammatory. After two years of head pain, Lisa was so anxious to be rid of it that she would have taken anything.

Over the next eight years the doctor changed the dosages. Sometimes the combinations made her physically ill, sometimes they knocked her out, but they never totally relieved her headaches. Taking pills though became an important part of her daily regimen—lining them up, taking them one by one. People soon learned to buy her pillboxes as gifts, and Lisa accumulated quite a collection in her purse. She stashed bottles of pills in her drawer at work; there were more at home in the medicine chest. The constant pain took an emotional toll. She became anxious, almost frantic to get away from it. She lost her zest for life; when she wasn’t at work she just wanted to lie down, to be quiet. For hours she would lie in the dark with an ice pack on her head.

Four years into this, when she became pregnant, she was able to quit for a time, but went right back after the birth of Meghan. The headaches had become severe, and to combat them she took a pill about every half hour. Filling those prescriptions became the most important thing in her life. The neurologist never denied her requests for more pills, and insurance covered the cost. Sadly, her life slipped into a haze, clouded by the intake of about 200 painkillers every three weeks.

After work each day she would drag herself home. Sometimes she couldn't manage to get through the dinner routine. She would collapse in bed and leave Dave with the care of Meghan, the preparation of dinner, the dishes, everything. She couldn't face any of it. The pain in her head never let up.

Then one morning in 1983, she arrived at work to hear, "Lisa, we're letting you go." She was fired for being an addict. She protested saying she was under a doctor's care. Her argument was ignored, and unemployment benefits were denied because of her, as she put it at the time, "so called addiction."

She found another job as an administrative assistant with a home-builder. During the first week there Lisa had to appear for her hearing. And she lost.

Devastated over the unfairness, She slammed into the office of her new job. "I can't believe this is happening," she muttered to herself. "How dare they accuse me of being addicted!" Tears welled up.

"Can I help, Lisa?" Robin, a lovely young black woman from the office across the hall, stood beside her. She had said hello to her several times. Lisa's was a small office with a staff of five, and she didn't know her own coworkers yet.

Sensing in Robin an understanding spirit, Lisa described to her the way she had been treated by her former employer. "It was really political," she told her. "They were jealous because the boss gave me information that others didn't have. They ganged up on me, told him I was an addict, blamed me for mistakes that weren't my fault... What would you do, Robin, if you were me?"

"I'd pray," she said simply.

"What?" Astonished, Lisa tried to set her straight: "Oh, I don't believe in any of that. And, besides, I don't know how to pray."

"I'll be happy to pray for you, Lisa, if you'd like." She said it so easily, as if it were the normal thing to do.

"Okay." Lisa felt embarrassed. "I guess it can't hurt."

This was not her way of handling a situation. She believed in confrontation, not in hiding behind God. If there was a God.

But in all the years of pain and pills much of the feistiness had drained from her. There was no fight left, so she bowed her head along with Robin and listened to her straightforward prayer about her need for help. Then she asked, “Lisa, would you like to go to church with me on Sunday?”

She said yes, meaning no, but Lisa did go. She had nowhere else to turn. She was curious, and she was tired—tired of being sick, tired of never having energy, tired of the unfairness of life, tired of being out of control.

What happened then was something she’d considered unthinkable for someone like her. Until that day Lisa wasn’t even sure there was a God, but that Sunday morning she found that it all made sense. God was real, and she had to respond. So she took everything that troubled her, went to the front of the church, and gave all of her pain, and herself, to Christ... just like that! And something mysterious happened. She felt like shouting! The relief of knowing she wasn’t alone in life, that a loving, powerful God walked with her, sent a thrill through her. She felt excited!

Her head still ached. Now, though, she could talk with God. He would understand. He would help her.

Six months later Lisa walked into the office of a new doctor. She was expecting a renewal of her prescriptions, but she told Lisa matter-of-factly, “It is dangerous to take this much medication—for eight years, did you say?”

“But you don’t understand!” Lisa was ready to subdue this doctor’s attempts to interfere with her prescriptions. “I have a headache that won’t go away—”

“You don’t understand,” she told me. “You are addicted to painkillers...Eight years! It’s a wonder you’re still alive.”

Her mouth flew open. For the first time she was hearing it from a doctor. She was an addict.

Seeing her stunned look, the doctor reassured her, "It will be a struggle, but I'm going to help you get off these drugs. We'll work together. You're not alone."

The doctor began cutting back the dosages. Her life became torture, but she was right: She was not alone. She was there to guide her, to see that Lisa got counseling. Her new boss was supportive; he knew she was going through withdrawal. And during those days when she felt as if she couldn't sit still, when she had to walk and walk and walk, Lisa would ask God, "Get me through this day, please." At night, when she'd sometimes be violently ill, she would pray, "Lord, I feel so weak. Please stay beside me." Fiercely, she clung to the Bible passage that promised He would take our burdens and give us rest.

It was six months before her burden grew lighter. She knew, though, that the pain in her head was diminishing. And one morning in 1985 she awoke to find it gone. And so was her addiction. She was free at last!

When she wrote her story back in 1991, she still confronts things with a can-do attitude, but now, she confronts it with God's help.

This week's Gospel reminds us we do too. But we have to open our eyes to the reality of the situation, and open them to God's mercy. Jesus confronting the devil and temptation is a story too of how God goes into battle with us, but also a wake-up call to open our eyes to reality of sin in our lives.

First, we see that God stands with us. God undermines the devil. His presence among us shows us how much we are loved, for in Jesus we have not just the friendship of God, but our redemption. He stands with us to help us in our temptations, to forgive our sins. So first and foremost, we cling to Him, for as we hear in the second reading though the obedience of Jesus, we are made righteous. We can turn to him for help, and forgiveness, knowing that both are always there.

However, while there is mercy, there is also evil still in this world. The devil still seeks souls, and hasn't stopped fighting. Remember, the devil isn't someone like a cartoon character as described by Screwtape; rather he is a fallen angel who turned against God and fought against God. Jesus has won, and stands with us to give us mercy and strength, but God also gives

us free will. Note where Jesus' temptations occur: the wilderness. It's where human beings went after being expelled from the garden. You can think of the wilderness as the world too. And in Lisa's life, she at first didn't see her addiction as a problem. She refused to own up to it for many years, until finally her eyes were opened by the doctor and she could say, yes, I am an addict. So what is your addiction? What is your temptation? Sin isn't something to be minimized or ignored. Rather, with Jesus, we confront it head on.

The game plan for doing this is first, remembering we are not alone. It seems odd to hear Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the desert" but think of that as leading by exhortation. The Spirit is guiding Jesus, standing with Him. God gives us strength too. We do not only run to Jesus for mercy, but do what Lisa did when Robin told her to pray. Prayer gives us strength; its why we ask in the Lord's prayer to be helped not to fall into temptation. But note also what Lisa did too, she prayed, but she got help. She had her doctor, her friend. We can do a lot alone, but it's also a sign of strength to say "help me." Our sins can sometimes be embarrassing or very private things. But we can't always think "what would the neighbors think." We need people we can talk to for advice who won't judge us, but will help us, pray with us, hold us accountable, and with whom we can do the same. So if you are battling something in particular, don't fear reaching out.

Lastly, when we are tempted, it really helps to have a plan of action. In the act of contrition, we pray to avoid the near occasion of sin. For some, it might mean say no alcohol in the house, or not associating with certain people who will cause you to make bad decisions. If a person struggles with sensual sins, they could check to see what's coming in on the cable box, keep the computer off or in a public area if they live with someone, watch use of the phone etc. Other times it can just help to busy oneself with activities to counter temptations, like doing some housework or repairs or going to a gym or for a walk. Putting our energies into other things can really help in the battles.

Henri Nouwen in reflecting on the Gospel sees one of the lies of the devil is that we are what we do. The devil tells Jesus if he really is God's son, then prove it by doing something amazing. For us, we can be duped by this lie with the devil. We can think if we look perfect, then our families, the neighbors, others at school or work will think we are perfect. Or we can get caught in the cycle of shame, thinking this sin we struggle with is defining

who we are. But the truth is our God is victorious. Our God loves us. Our God stands with us. It doesn't matter how old you are: At times it can be very difficult to accept God's never-ending and all-powerful love. Today, God claims us by a truth infinitely more powerful than any of this world's lies: We are his beloved children. So as we receive Holy Communion, may we never forget that God stands by us and loves us more than we can ever imagine, and let that love define us by who we are, sons and daughters of a loving God, and respond to that love fighting the temptations and sins in our lives, and together overcoming them.