

# THE FIRST TEMPTATION

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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 - The tree of the knowledge of good and evil  
Matthew 4:1-11 - The temptation of Jesus

We begin the season of Lent on the theme of “temptation.” No doubt, the contrast between today’s two readings is what caused the lectionary writers to put them together. We so often find contrast where New Testament stories reflect the patterns of Old Testament stories. In today’s Genesis reading the tempter won the day with Adam and Eve in the Garden. They succumbed to the temptation. In Matthew, however, Jesus resisted the temptation in the wilderness.

The ancient mythological stories such as the Garden of Eden are so rich and so deep; that is why they have persisted over the years. There are many, many facets to those stories, but the one that really stands out for me today is not actually the reason for the parallel that I just mentioned. It is, rather, the sense in which yielding to the temptation of the tree of knowledge of good and evil results in the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It is the mythological understanding that, at the foundation of human life, there is a movement out of innocence--out of the Garden of Eden where there is no challenge or temptation, where we can just live in our innocence--and into the harshness of life.

We have within us this deep sense that we have come from “innocence” but somehow have lost it; and that, in some ways, life seems like an attempt to regain that innocence. And yet the story suggests that the direction of life makes movement from innocence irreversible--that we can’t “unknow” the knowledge of good and evil as a human race. We’re faced with a life in which good and evil are mixed together, and we’ve just got to deal with it; we don’t get to go back to the innocence of Eden. Psychologists, also, say there’s a tendency in human nature to want to return to a kind of infantile state, a state of irresponsible innocence. That’s a real part of our psychological makeup. And yet, this story tells us we don’t get to go back; we must address ourselves to life as it is.

Against that background we have the story of Jesus, after his baptism early in his ministry, fasting in the wilderness for forty days. Here we have an even more dramatic parallel to the patterns of the Old Testament stories, because the baptism into and out of the waters of the river parallel the story of the people of Israel crossing the Red Sea as they left Egypt. That crossing, that coming through the waters, was like a rebirth. And their spending forty years in the wilderness paralleled the forty days which Jesus spent in the wilderness.

Scholars today are saying that the historical factuality of these stories is not so important. They say the really important thing is the metaphorical power and meaning which is so much deeper and so much richer and doesn’t depend on any historical factuality. This story is so rich with the reflections of that long two- or three-thousand-

year heritage of faith relationship with God. At the very heart of that relationship, the primary experience of the people of Israel--the people of God--was the Exodus. That was the formative experience for them as a people, just as the crucifixion and resurrection are central and formative and key to Christian understanding of life and faith. And so we have this story of Jesus beginning his ministry by, in a sense, reliving the whole Exodus experience, the wilderness wandering and all that happened during that time. So he goes out into the wilderness following his baptism, and he begins by fasting for forty days. The temptations come right at the end of that time.

Forty days is a long time to fast. The meaning of “fasting” varies, of course. Sometimes it means eating once a day, or limiting what is eaten; sometimes it means no eating at all for a period of time. We can survive for almost forty days without food, but I don’t think we can survive for a whole forty days entirely without food. The fasting experience is a powerful part of Christian spirituality. I had a few one- or two-day fasting experiences years ago. But it was a seven-day fast which was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. It occurred at the Vancouver School of Theology. I was doing this as a witness for peace making, and the whole community was supporting me.

One of the interesting things I always remember is how I would get hungry at meal times. When I hadn’t eaten anything for two days my stomach would grumble for a little while at noon and then it would quit. I learned from that that stomach grumbling has nothing to do with hunger at all; it’s just appetite, just a conditioned response. Hunger is something much deeper. Hunger occurs when the body starts to destroy itself--to break down its own muscle tissue--and the result is a continuous pain twenty-four hours a day. It is painful! I don’t think anyone in this room has ever experienced “hunger”. None of us has ever been “hungry.” All we’ve ever experienced is our appetite.

Another thing I learned is that appetite stops after about two days. I started going down to lunch at the cafeteria, sitting with my friends and drinking a glass of water while they were eating lunch. They looked at me and said: “Isn’t this driving you crazy? You haven’t had anything to eat for three or four days.” I replied: “No. My stomach’s not even grumbling.” But the question some people ask is whether one gets weak? The question is interesting because there is a way in which one does get weak, and that is in terms of the kind of strength needed to be really energetic through the day. There is another way in which one gets weak, and that results from the toxicity of what happens in the digestive system. But when one learns how to fast safely, that can be prevented.

There is a third consequence of fasting, and that relates to the mental, spiritual, perceptual, experience. Here the result is precisely the opposite--one doesn’t get weaker; one gets stronger. There is a sharpening and a deepening of the spiritual sense and the mental clarity that happens with fasting. That is the most exciting aspect; that is the reason for spiritual fasting. So I have a bit of a picture of what it would be like for Jesus to fast for forty days, even if it was just a partial fast--what it would be like to experience the clarity and depth of that spiritual and mental sharpening that happens with fasting. And so it is in that moment that Jesus encounters the demons at the heart of life--the tempter, the *diabolos*, the *satanos*, the tester.

Jesus describes three temptations, three challenges, that he faced in his “exodus,” his wilderness time. The first one is about turning the stones into bread. The tempter tells Jesus: “You could feed everybody; there would be no more hunger in the world.” Jesus remembers the end of the Exodus when it was time for the people to cross over into the Promised Land. Moses didn’t get to see the Promised Land because he died just before the rest of them crossed into it. But Moses told them what they were going to have to know to live in the Promised Land, and that marvellous teaching is the book of Deuteronomy.

So, in response to his tempter, Jesus remembers Moses, the wisdom of Deuteronomy (8:3), the experience of his people during their forty years in the wilderness, and the manna that came down from heaven. They didn’t have any other source of food, but every morning it was there on the ground to be gathered and eaten, and day by day the people were fed. Some of them got nervous and greedy, and tried to collect and preserve it, but it just spoiled. The message in all that was God saying: “You just need to trust me every day and I’ll provide you what you need. You can’t hoard it; you can’t build your own security.” So Jesus reflects on that experience and says it wouldn’t have been enough for those people merely to have lots of bread to eat because what God was doing with them in the wilderness was training them to live, to cultivate the inner life. God was teaching them that the spiritual inner life goes with the material outer life--that those two need to go together. We can’t live by bread alone.

Walter Wink is a New Testament theology professor at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, and in his book *Naming the Powers* he discusses his understanding of the New Testament language of “heaven,” “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God.” In his view, that language refers to the inner reality of life--the spiritual inside of life--that we must always be living alongside the material outer life. For example, the provision of bread, food for the hungry, all over the world doesn’t end starvation unless we are also experiencing that spiritual transformation within us--that transformation out of the greed, out of the emptiness and the hunger that is within the heart and soul.

Wink points out that one of the weaknesses of our Christian tradition is our tendency to be on one side or the other. In other words, we try to solve all the problems of the world in a purely spiritual way--in a way that tends to get away from the material outwardness of life--or we try to solve those problems in terms of a purely material way without dealing with the spirit. We need to learn how to live those together, and that’s the power of what God did in Christ, in incarnation. The spirit, God, the sacred, comes into the flesh. And so we live the material and spiritual together. So Jesus recalls the words in Deuteronomy from the Exodus, from his people in their formative time, and he says there was a lesson that we learned way, way back then. That lesson? Bread alone isn’t enough. There is something else we need in life.

For the second temptation, Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and tells him to throw himself down. “Let God take care of you, send the angels. You won’t get hurt.” Jesus responds by saying--and again it goes back to the story of the Exodus (Deut. 6:16)--“No, you shall not tempt the Lord your God; you shall not test.” In Greek, it is the same word that is variously translated “test” or “tempt”, the former being the basic or

literal meaning, and the latter being the metaphorical meaning: a malicious kind of testing.

You shall not test God. This is an interesting idea. We are all inclined to test God when we get into a time in life when we feel at risk, because we want to know that God is there. The voice of Satan in this second temptation is getting really clever. You see, what is happening is that Satan is testing or tempting Jesus, and the temptation is to test God. Do you see the flip, tempting him to test God? Now, the temptation to test God is a kind of reversal of our understanding of our relationship with God because God tests us.

But testing does not always have the malicious intent of temptation. Testing is a part of learning, and life is learning. Life is a continuous journey of deepening our spiritual life and facing the new challenges that come to us every day and every year of our lives as we age, as our children age, as the world changes around us. The spiritual journey, also, is a continuous learning; and every step calls us to move beyond our comfort zone and to take some risk and to go through the discomfort and sometimes pain of actually learning and growing and facing more of the truth about ourselves. It's a scary time; we don't just sail through comfortably. That is when we want to test God--to say: "I'll go there, but I want to be sure you're with me; I want to be sure it's all going to turn out right. Give me some kind of sign that will make me feel secure, that will make me feel like I'm back in Eden where there are no challenges and no dangers in life. Let me read the last chapter and be sure it all turns out fine in the end." That kind of temptation loses, ruins, spoils, the learning opportunity. And so Jesus goes back to the story of the Exodus and says that is what happened at Massah when the people got so scared. They were out there, and there wasn't even any water. Moses had to take the elders over to the rock and did that marvellous thing with his staff and the water came out of the rock. The people had lost their courage and needed assurance. That's what the Hebrew word "*massah*" means--it means testing. You shall not put the Lord your God to the test as our people did at Massah. That's another of the lessons of the Exodus.

Satan goes on to the third temptation and takes Jesus to the top of the mountain. "Kingdoms of the world," he says, "they are all yours, all yours. You just fall down and worship me." But Jesus says "No. No, there have always been other Gods that we could worship. When we came into the Promised Land at the end of the Exodus there were other people there. They had their Gods and there were many of us who were attracted to try out another God or two. That was a temptation and we had to learn to stay faithful to Yahweh." And that's what we need to do. The kingdoms of the world are a symbol of power, and that's the temptation for all of us. It's the temptation to get so much control and so much power in life that we don't have any more vulnerability. There's a way in which relating to life in the world through a quest for power is actually antithetical to love.

And so Jesus is pointing, again from the story of the Exodus (Deut. 6:13), to that deeply relational quality of our spiritual life. It's not manipulating God, it's not testing God, it's not using God as some little divine servant who is going to do everything we ask. Rather, it's a relationship, a bond of love, a covenant that calls for faithfulness and fidelity. It's the difference between one who is sexually promiscuous and off after another partner and another and another, on the one hand, and on the other hand a truly bonded relationship in a marriage between two people who discover the meaning of

faithfulness to one another--who discover that there is absolutely nothing in life that could be richer or deeper than that relationship. A relationship with God is exactly that. It's a relationship, not a power game. So Jesus draws again from the experience of his people in the Exodus, and resists that temptation about power by going back to that deeply relational quality of our relationship with God.

That's a universal story. It's not just one story about Jesus way back then. There's a way in which we live Jesus' temptations in the wilderness every day of our lives. Every day we experience the temptation to live for the material and the outer and to get all that in place, and to put too much energy into that and not enough energy into cultivating the spiritual inner life and satisfying that hunger. As a matter of fact I think people's compulsion about bigger houses and bigger cars and all of that is often really an unconscious compensation for the inner spiritual hunger which is the real hunger they are experiencing but don't know it. And every day of our lives we experience the temptation to get some security, to be sure about something, to test God and look for some kind of guarantee so that we don't have to face the terror of growing and learning and facing the truth about ourselves. Facing that truth would lead us on to a deeper spiritual life and a deeper relationship with God. We want some way that doesn't take so much risk, that is not so scary, that doesn't feel so uncomfortable. That temptation is there for us every day of our lives. Every day we feel the need for more control, more power, more ability to make things happen the way we want them to happen.

And yet, if we give in to that we lose the relatedness to life. The more power we gain the more isolated, the more disconnected, the more alienated, we feel from one another and from God. But there is an answer for that. We put our energy into an entirely different direction in order to cultivate the relational aspect of life rather than power and control. So every one of us lives the story of those temptations every day, and we don't get to go back to Eden--we don't get to "un-know" the good and the evil. We live out our lives permanently "east of Eden," (Gen 4:16) but Jesus has shown us that in our spiritual heritage, in our tradition all through the centuries, the answers to those temptations have been given. All we need to do is remind ourselves every day and we'll live victorious, even "east of Eden."

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