



## **I can resist anything but temptation**

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Year A, Lent 1

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-5, Matthew 4: 1-11

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I can resist anything but temptation. Some of you might be familiar with that quote from Oscar Wilde. The cleverness of Oscar Wilde was his ability to make observations about very human thoughts and behaviours in ways that were playful and entertaining. This is, more or less, the definition of what it is to be a witty person which Oscar Wilde definitely was.

The line, I can resist anything but temptation, is funny because often something described as a temptation is cast as being a poor or unhealthy option, and yet part of us still desires to make the bad choice.

I can remember watching cartoons as a child where a character was faced with two choices. Suddenly that character would have an angel appear on one shoulder and a devil on the other, with each spiritual being advocating for one of the two options. And being that these were cartoons designed to entertain children, the devil always won the debate and would lead the character into some sort of mischief with funny and sometimes dire consequences.

What I appreciate about the way this was often done, was that when the angel and devil appeared they were animated to look like the character who was making the decision. For example, if Bugs Bunny was being tempted to steal carrots a little version of Bugs Bunny with a halo, wings and harp would appear on one shoulder, while a miniature Bugs Bunny in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork would appear on the other. What this communicated somewhat effectively was that the conflict between choosing right and choosing wrong was happening within Bugs Bunny himself. Bugs was able to tell right from wrong, so the voices urging him to do the right thing or the wrong thing were actually his own.

I believe that the Gospel narratives that tell the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness are attempting to convey a similar idea, but actually do a poorer job than cartoons like the one I just described. They are poorer because rather than presenting Jesus as wrestling with an internal struggle, they suggest that temptation came to Jesus from an external source. While we can be tempted in such a way, the reality is we only experience

temptation through the experience of wanting to do something which we know could have negative consequences for ourselves and or others. And that is a debate that happens within ourselves. An important claim of the early church was that Jesus was fully human. As such we cannot read stories such as today's about the temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness as if he were some superhero, blessed with powers of restraint that few of us possess.

To say that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness is to say that he experienced moments where making the best choice was incredibly difficult. If these choices were not difficult, then they cannot be described as temptation.

So how exactly was Jesus tempted? On the face of it the first temptation seems so simple. We are told that Jesus has been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights. There is some debate about what this actually means. Many scholars suggest that fasting is typically a practice of going without food during the hours of daylight. That said finding food in the wilderness is no easy task either. What the text is clear about, is that regardless of how Jesus was fasting, after a prolonged period with little to no food he was extremely hungry.

Have you ever experienced being truly hungry? And here I'm not talking about a late lunch or missing a meal or two. There have only been a few of times in my life where I have had to experience more than a day without food. And yes, I am acutely aware of what a privilege it is to be able to say that. I think the worst experience I've had was going close to 50 hours without eating. And what I remember so vividly about this experience was how incredibly good that first meal was after that time of fasting. It was chicken noodle soup and will probably always hold the status of the best meal I've ever had. That said, I cannot even begin to imagine how hungry one would feel after weeks of fasting. What my limited experience of food deprivation taught me, is that when you are hungry for a significant period of time, it is incredibly difficult to function at all.

So, the first temptation faced by Jesus is very primal. It is driven by that basic need to eat. But it is not food which is the temptation for Jesus. The temptation is the means by which Jesus can get that much needed mouthful of bread. Rather than returning from the wilderness to a place where food is available, Jesus is tempted to do the miraculous; to turn the rocks of the wilderness into food.

Why not, you might wonder? After all the Gospels tell us that Jesus performed many miracles. A key difference is that the healing miracles of Jesus are always acts of compassion that bring new life into the world. By contrast to turn rocks into food Jesus would have upended the established rules of creation. Instead of having a world where humanity responds to God's love by working

within creation for the betterment of all, we would have a world where God is simply expected to give us all we need. The stakes of what Jesus is wrestling with goes far beyond being hungry. To perform such a miracle would destroy the divine human relationship in such a way, that God would bear sole responsibility for every misfortune, with humanity becoming completely exempt.

This point is then reemphasised with the second temptation, testing God. Bargaining with God is something we all do from time to time. I can remember times in high school where I desperately asked God to provide me with the homework I hadn't done. I have asked God to make all sorts of problems disappear. And in times of sickness I have certainly asked God for healing, and by healing I definitely mean a cure.

Some of these patterns were even affirmed in churches I attended as a teenager. I have heard preachers misquote biblical passages, telling us that if we can simply find enough faith we can make the impossible possible. But such approaches to our relationship with God, or our relationships with other human beings are not positive or healthy. They are simply transactional and operate at the basic level of, I will give you this, if you give me that. More often than not, such approaches to any relationship simply lead to disappointment.

The second temptation invites Jesus into exactly this kind of transaction. Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the Temple, the Devil suggests, and God will send angels to catch you. The temptation is for Jesus to treat his relationship with God as transactional. To see if God will respond in the way he wants God to. To treat a relationship in such a way is to reject trust as foundational, replacing that trust with a need for control. But loving relationships are not about control, they are based in a shared understanding that true partners seek to act with the others best interest at heart. Jesus is being tempted to control God, but chooses to love God instead.

It is the last temptation which speaks to the most dangerous of human desires, our lust for power. We live in a world that constantly celebrates fame, wealth, and influence, despite the fact that throughout history we have learnt over and over that these are highly corrupting influences. Even those who we believe seek power out of desire to do good can end up making decisions that are harmful to themselves and others. My personal bias is that I am deeply cynical when it comes to famous church leaders, because believe me there are many of them. And many of them quickly fall into the trap of serving themselves and neglecting to do the job we are called to do, which is to serve others. Don't even get me started on politicians.

And yet, I have to admit, I would quite like to be famous even if only in a small way. Maybe just an appearance or two on the news. Or a sermon that goes viral. Or perhaps one of my many followers might write a book describing what an incredibly inspirational person I am...and perhaps that book is adapted into an award winning movie so that future generations can appreciate just how utterly holy and special I am. OK, so I took that to a ridiculous degree, but that is how temptation works. Temptation slowly but surely draws us into more and more ridiculous situations promising us some sort of reward for our poor decisions. While your fantasies might differ from mine, the temptation to be just a little more successful, and little more influential, a little or even a great deal more powerful is something many of us will feel at some point in time.

But Jesus does not say yes to power. The path Jesus chooses is not easy, but is characterised by love and humility. Jesus seeks justice, and in doing so becomes the victim of great injustice. This is the pathway of a person who rejects power, and trusts God.

As we begin this season of Lent, we know that once again we will face the injustice of Good Friday before discovering the hope that lies beyond. So as we journey into the wilderness this year, three questions are worth sitting with: Are we tempted to take the easy path? Are we tempted to control rather than trust? Do we desire power over service to others? Amen.