

“Once a boy saw a piece of paper blown from an open window by the wind. When he looked at it, he found it was a beautiful drawing of a ship in full sail. The idea came into his mind that he could trace this drawing and hand it in to the school paper as his own work. He had been trying to get a job on the paper as illustrator. This drawing was so good they would surely take him, and nobody would know it was not his own. His name would appear in print, which would make him feel fine. Also, he would work very hard to improve his drawing so the school paper would not suffer. In fact, he would actually be doing a good thing—so how could it be wrong?” Although it was published almost sixty years ago, this story from the Episcopal Church School resource *More Than Words* offers us a simple example of how temptation can lure us into bad choices. As the book says, “a temptation usually presents itself as something attractive and grand. If it were ugly or hard it wouldn’t tempt us.”ⁱ

Today’s Gospel story about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness presents a striking contradiction to the story of Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden, the story often referred to as “The Fall.” Many have been taught that this “first sin” brought irreparable separation from God, not only for the first human beings, but for all of us who come after them. We must remember that this story is not meant to be taken literally; it is a legend written by an ancient Jewish author who wished to express what he knew to be true about *all* human beings: that God made us to live in love and harmony with God and all of creation; that we are separated from God by our own sin and the sins of the entire human race; and that only God can bring us back into relationship with God. By the way, there is no mention of an apple in this story! And let’s stop making Eve the scapegoat here—Adam also ate the fruit. And it’s about *us*, anyway—let’s accept that and learn from it!

The story of Jesus’ temptation is included in all three of the synoptic Gospels, and we hear from one or the other of them each year on the first Sunday of Lent. Mark’s version is the shortest; it includes the story of Jesus’ baptism, but no details of the temptations put before him. The language in Luke’s version is slightly different from Matthew’s, although there are many common details between the two. All three Gospels agree that Jesus’ time in the desert was forty days. Mark and Luke note that the Spirit led Jesus *in* the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Matthew writes that the Spirit led Jesus *into* the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Are these differences important? To some folks, perhaps they are; but let’s remember that each of these evangelists wrote to a different community at a different time. What’s important are the event and its outcome, particularly as they relate to Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection, and to our own stories as believers in Jesus Christ our Savior.

In his commentary on The Gospel of Matthew, New Testament scholar and interpreter Dr. William Barclay writes that Jesus recognized and accepted that his task was to lead people to God, but questioned how he would do it. Was he to adopt the method of a mighty conqueror? Or the incarnation of patient, sacrificial love? According to Dr. Barclay, that was the task—the decision—Jesus faced in his wilderness temptations. Barclay notes that this was not an outward experience, but an inner struggle of heart, mind, and soul to understand what he was called to do.ⁱⁱ The temptations were no less real because they were internal. Jesus recognized his own powers, but had to discern when and how to use them. As we know from studying his life and ministry, he chose to introduce them discreetly, and always used them for the benefit of others. The impact of his truthful but loving ministry was surely more far-reaching and long-lasting than it might have been if he had chosen to win people over through the awe and intimidation of what would have been perceived as magic.

We speculate about whether Jesus knew that he was both fully human and fully divine, and that question is not answered by today’s Gospel lesson. Yet his humanity is evident in the real struggle of his wilderness temptations. When we compare the temptation of Eve to Jesus’ temptation, we’re

probably not surprised that Eve, fully human, gave in but Jesus didn't. Both were tempted by the prospect of something extraordinary to be gained. In the stories of Jesus' encounter with the tempter, we see that each offer includes an "if," a means for Jesus to prove who he is. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." "If you will fall down and worship me, I will give all these to you." In the serpent's words to Eve, the "if" is stated as "when:" when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God. Temptations always offer benefit to the one who gives in to them, and for humans—like us and like the boy who found a beautiful drawing and considered turning it in as his own—those benefits may be hard to resist.

Would it be any easier if we recognized that the temptation is, in fact, a test? After all, that's what temptations are: tests—of our Christian beliefs, of our moral fiber, of our loyalty, honesty, love, our obedience to God. Every day we make choices about how to act, or how not to act. We make choices about what we will do and what we won't do. In the same way that Jesus struggled with how he would live and act as the Son of God, we must struggle with how we will live and act as people of his Way. And the reason why we struggle is that God, in generosity and love, gave us free will to make our own choices. From the first human beings in the Garden of Eden, to our Lord Jesus Christ, and continuing on to us, the right to make our own decisions, to choose our beliefs and our actions, has been a gift of freedom given by our Creator. Our infinitely-wise God knew that our choices are meaningless unless we are free to make them. What would have been the point of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness or of Eve's temptation in the Garden if their choices were preordained? And so it is with us.

There are always temptations before us. Daily we are challenged to make choices that will reflect our belief in the promises of God in Christ and our understanding of the Gospel. Unfortunately we sometimes we don't choose wisely. But as Paul so awkwardly reminds us in his Letter to the Romans, free will is not our only God-given gift. Each of us is the recipient of God's Grace, loving kindness known to us through God in Christ, working in us and through us in ways we may not perceive and cannot understand. Through God's grace may we be guided to make faithful choices, to know and do those things that are pleasing to God, now and always.

Let us pray.

Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought us in safety to this new day. Preserve us with your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all we do, direct us to the fulfilling of your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

ⁱ *More Than Words: A Resource Book for Church School Teachers and for Students in Junior High School Classes.* Seabury Press, Greenwich, 1958. Pg. 186.

ⁱⁱ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1, Revised Edition.* Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975. Pg. 61.