

Trust God and Be Yourself

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Genesis 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

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At first blush, the story of Jesus' wilderness temptations seems far-fetched and fanciful. When was the last time you were approached by a wily, demonic figure like the one in this story, or in *The Exorcist*, or in *Paradise Lost*?

But then something like the coronavirus comes along and rips the story of Jesus' temptations out of the gospels and slaps them into the headlines. For the coronavirus crisis, like Satan, serves up two fundamental temptations: the temptation to be *more than we are* and the temptation to *be less*.

Consider the news coming out of Korea where nearly 500 of the 1,000 reported cases of the Covid-19 infection are linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, described by Korean authorities as a cult. So why is such a large outbreak of the coronavirus found in a single Korean church community of some 200,000 members? Perhaps because the members were told to ignore the virus and to focus on converting more followers. At a February 22 rally in Seoul, one charismatic leader told a group of mostly older and more vulnerable Koreans God would cure them of the disease, if they caught it, but if not, then it was "Patriotic" to die from the virus.

Sure sounds like Satan's shoptalk to me: the belief that the faithful are immune to the limits and vulnerabilities of being human: "Take a dive from the highest pinnacle of the temple and watch God rescue you!" (Mt. 4:6); and the belief that grandstanding for God will bring unimaginable success (Mt. 4:10). Little wonder officials in Seoul have banned gatherings of this sect lest it continue to fuel the spread of the virus.

Of course, it's easy to see the foolishness of others. But what about the fear and near hysteria now gripping us? The stock market has tumbled, trouncing our 401ks or our retirement income. And now, the coronavirus has slipped out of Asia and shown up on our shores. The first fatality on U.S. soil has been reported. Who will be next? How soon before the dreaded Covid-19 infection ends up on a door handle we are about to touch?

Yes, the temptation to be more than we are--super-human and invincible, and the temptation to be less than we are--helpless with no loving God or native resourcefulness to see us through this crisis are the devil's favorite ploys.

So no, the story of Jesus' temptations is not just the stuff of legends. These succulent temptations and terrifying truths haunt us still.

For three years, early in my ministry, I studied with a sharp, savvy rabbi named Ed Friedman. Ed went on to write a pivotal book integrating the then-emerging field of family systems therapy with ancient truths found in the Hebrew scriptures.

For example, Ed taught that family dysfunctions arise when someone tries to take on the Omni attributes of God. The Omni attributes are the belief God is *omniscient*, all-knowing, *omnipotent*, all-powerful, and *omnipresent*, everywhere present. Whenever we start believing we can know everything, or control everything, or please everybody, we have fallen for the primal temptation, the one Satan whispers to Eve and Adam in the garden: the temptation to be *like God* (Gen. 3:5).

Each of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness is the temptation to be more than human, that is, to be like God. "Are you hungry?" the devil coos. "No need for that. Turn these stones into bread!"

"Are you eager for people to hear your message? Then take a nose dive off the temple heights. When the angels rescue you, people will be compelled to believe!"

"Do you want to be a world-class success? Then bend the rules and do things my way."

Notice that none of Satan's enticements are bad things, in and of themselves. People need to eat, religious teachers must win a hearing, and the more people know about Jesus the better. In each case, the devil doesn't tempt Jesus to be less than who he is: the beloved son of God. No, the devil tempts Jesus to be more than who he is, namely, a demigod instead of the holy, yet truly human One.

In his book, *What's Right with the Church?*, Will Willimon tells about teaching a Sunday School lesson on the temptations of Jesus. After discussing each temptation in turn, Willimon asked, "So how are we tempted today?"

A young salesman was the first to speak. "Temptation is when your boss calls you in, as mine did this week, and says, 'I'm going to give you a real opportunity. We're expanding your sales territory. We believe you're going places young man.'"

"But I don't *need* a larger territory," the salesman answered. "I'm already away from home four nights a week. It wouldn't be fair to my wife and daughter."

"Look," his boss replied. "We're asking you to do this *for* your wife and daughter. Don't you want to be a good father? It takes money to support a family these days. Sure, your little girl doesn't take much money now, but think of the future. Think of *her* future. I'm only asking you to do this *for them*."

Wincing at the memory, the young salesman said earnestly, "Now *that's* temptation."

Any time we are tempted to do more or be more than is humanly possible--especially for a good cause!--the devil is at it again: "You can be . . . *like God!*" The most powerful temptation, especially for high achievers, is to ignore one's limits while making impossible demands of oneself: like expecting to get through a crippling grief without being blindsided by the pain and tears that assail lesser mortals; or refusing to accept someone's cruel rejection by trying harder and harder to please them; or believing if you work hard enough and pray hard enough, you can save an addict all by yourself, instead of getting them to AA and yourself to Al-Anon.

Thankfully, Jesus shows us a better way. During his forty days of temptation, he resists the devil's lies by refusing to let passing successes or struggles define him. Instead, each time the devil tries to seduce Jesus away from God, Jesus grounds himself anew in God's faithfulness, truth, and love. Quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, Jesus says, "Human beings shall not live by bread alone but by every word that falls from the mouth of God" (Dt. 8:3). "Human beings are not to test the God" (Dt. 6:16). And "human beings are to worship no one and nothing other than the Lord their God!" (Dt. 6:13).

As Charles Spurgeon, the great English Baptist preacher of the 19th century observed, "Out flashed the sword of the Spirit: our Lord will fight with no other weapon. He could have spoken new revelations, but he chose to say, 'It is written.' There is a power in the word of God which even the devil cannot deny."

The Bible is the family album of the people of God. And the Bible's story, especially when read through the life and witness of Jesus, tells us who we are: the beloved children of God. So whenever the devil says to us, as the devil said to Jesus, "*If you are the son of God*" . . . "*If you are a child of God,*" the alert believer silences all such provocations with a thundering truth: "What do you mean, *if?* According to Jesus, *I am* God's beloved son or daughter. Right

now. Already. Before I do or don't do anything else. So I'm done chasing after yet titillating half-truths and disastrous dead ends trying to be somebody else."

John Claypool delighted in the story of his friend, the rabbi, who had a dream that was life-changing. The rabbi dreamed he died and faced the judgment. Trembling before his Maker, he was shocked by the question God asked. For the question God asked was not, "Why weren't you Abraham? Or why weren't you Moses? Or why weren't you David?"

No, the game-changing question God asked was, "Why weren't you *yourself*?"

What if that's all God asks of you? Not that you be super-human or super-smart or super-successful of but only an absolutely unique, marvelous and beautiful, expression of yourself?

Well, the good news of Jesus is that God is asking nothing more, and nothing less, than this: that you finally start acting and living like the beloved child of God you are. Thus, the real spiritual work in your life is not becoming an idealized version of yourself, but peeling back the lies and illusions so the real you can emerge.

Not that this is easy, of course. Sadly, Genesis' story of the fall is the story of us all. Essentially, the serpent tells Eve that who she is, God's beloved child, is not enough. She needs to be something more. So if she will just transgress the one boundary God has set--eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil--her eyes will be opened and she will be like God.

Soon Eve and her sidekick Adam are doubting God's word and savoring the devil's lies. They eat the forbidden fruit and, as promised, their eyes are opened. But what they experience is not the divine status and immortality hoped for, but only shame and self-loathing that drive them into hiding from God, from one another, and from their own truest selves (Gen. 3:7-8).

And so it is with me. When I refuse to listen, because I know it all; or fail to love as I should, settling for suspicion and hostility; or ignore my limits, trying to be and do more than is

reasonable and responsible, I don't experience the exhilaration expected. Instead, I soon find disappointment and sadness and even shame setting in over how I have wounded others or myself. Then, like Eve and Adam, cowering in a thicket in the garden, I feel the need to hide.

In Bangkok, Thailand, there is a temple dominated by a huge golden Buddha. It is an extraordinary treasure, worth hundreds of millions of dollars. But for untold centuries, the golden Buddha lay hidden beneath a thin veneer of clay. Historians believe monks covered the golden Buddha in clay to hide it from an invading army. But the monks were murdered and the secret of the golden Buddha died with them.

Then in 1957, a highway was built over the site of the Buddhist monastery. A crane was brought in to move the imposing Buddha, but as the statue was being raised, the Buddha cracked. A worried monk ordered it lowered to the ground.

To his surprise, he saw gold gleaming through cracks in the clay. Wondering what was inside, he fetched a hammer and chisel. As he knocked off the shards of clay, the gleam grew brighter. Several hours later, he stood awestruck before a solid gold Buddha, ten feet tall.

The New Testament says "Your life is *hidden* with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). The person you most truly are--God's good creation and God's beloved son or daughter--may be hidden from *your* view, but that person is not hidden from *God's* view.

Indeed, our gracious God sent Jesus into the world to chip away the clay of our half-truths, pretending, and self-deception that at long last, he might be and speak the truth that sets us free: We don't need to be more than we are, and we don't need to be less. We just need to be an authentic, fully human embodiment of the person God created and calls us to be.

Oh. And as for the coronavirus?

We don't need to be reckless or dismissive, as though this deadly pathogen could never touch *us*.

Nor do we need to be paralyzed by fear as though God's providence and our own industry and intelligence were not enough to contain and defeat this virus. They are and in time, they will.

But in the meantime, while facing this threat and every other, let us trust God and be ourselves. Because when we trust God and trust ourselves, the golden gleam of the person we most truly are begins to shine.

And *that* person, beloved and blessed by God, is always enough.

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Eternal God, save us from trying to be more, or less, than we are. Instead, as we follow Jesus, lead us to the truth about you and the truth about ourselves: that we are your beloved children, now and forevermore. And that is always enough.

In Jesus' name, we ask this. Because of him, we knew we could. Amen.