

## Matthew 4:1-11. Lent 1

Lent is a season in which many people follow special forms of self-discipline, most commonly “giving something up” for Lent. On Facebook I posted some alternative ideas having to do with noticing and increasing gratitude, but if renouncing meat or alcohol or even chocolate is your personal piety, I don’t want to knock you off your game. There are certainly many people for whom fasting and/or almsgiving and/or particular forms of prayer are meaningful ways to turn toward God and share Christ’s journey to the Cross during this holy season. If you are one of them, by all means, proceed.

Let’s start with the bad news. Willpower is not a muscle that you can exercise in order to make it stronger. Study after study has shown that human beings have a limited pool of willpower to draw on, and prolonged use of willpower will inevitably exhaust it. If you’re trying to lose weight, I think you would agree, it’s not a great idea to bake four or five cakes so that you can merely gaze upon their beauty and build up your reserves of restraint. I mean, you do you, but it wouldn’t work for me.

Instead, the experts say, you should design your environment to increase your chances of success. If you’re trying to get better sleep, wind down a half hour before bedtime. More fiber? Stock your fridge with pre-cut vegetables, and then throw together some overnight oats so that they’re ready in the morning. And so on. Make good behavior the default setting, right?

It’s a little bit of a conundrum, then, that Jesus would allow himself to be led into the wilderness, half-starved, to be tempted by the devil. Wouldn’t he have done better to stick to civilization and avoid the devil altogether, instead of planting himself in his path? To bring a box of ClifBars and not have to deal with hunger at all? Contrary to the wisdom of lifestyle magazines, avoiding “temptation” is rarely as cut and dried as the notion that we’d be better off without a lot of salt and fat. Or chocolate. For the most part, the actual temptations that dog us are both more serious and far less visible.

I’ve always had a bit of a soft spot for the story of Adam and Eve, since it seems to me their story could be my story. Given one tree that they’re not supposed to harvest from, of course they gravitate toward that one. And of

course that one tree bears the fruit of the Knowledge of Good & Evil. It's like those four or five cakes I mentioned earlier, rotating lusciously in space. Naturally I'm going to reach for one. But I really don't think the conclusion we're supposed to draw is simply that curiosity killed the cat. That's unfair to cats.

Adam and Eve want the knowledge of good and evil because they think then they can cut out the middleman. They will no longer need God but get to decide for themselves what is good. And while deciding for ourselves *is* a freedom that free will offers, we humans do it pretty disastrously. We have immense capacity for self-centeredness. We can rationalize any behavior as good. Seen in that light, God setting boundaries around one solitary thing in the midst of unspeakable abundance isn't an unjust restriction but a gracious limit to our endless propensity for moving the goal posts to serve our own ends.

And those are the temptations that Jesus goes into the wilderness to expose for us. Not, as we are so commonly led to believe, "fun stuff you're not allowed to do." Lizzie McManus-Dail, whose book *God Didn't Make Us to Hate Us* we are reading as our Wednesday Lenten devotional, goes on to say that maybe most people think about sin like this: "fun stuff you're not allowed to do, and especially with your body, *especially* if your body is not the kind of body the church wants it to be."<sup>1</sup> And we could fill in all the ways in which that idea has been used against queer bodies, female bodies, disabled bodies, racialized bodies, to point fingers away from our own kinds of brokenness.

Instead, Rev. Lizzie says, sin is "much more fundamental" than that, being whatever separates us from God and from one another. And nothing separates us more from God than the belief that we don't need God. It's not our bodies that fail us, no matter what you have been taught. It is our toddler-like insistence on doing it all by ourselves, without help.

Is Jesus' primary challenge that he is hungry and in need of bread? Or that he will have to trust God to provide for him? Is it that he needs to claim the title "Child of God" so as not to risk disbelief in his mission? Many will refuse to believe it anyway. Is it that the devil could give him glory and

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<sup>1</sup> p.8

power? Or that those attributes are already at his command, but his Way is not the way of glory and power?

In Matthew, Jesus is figured as the Child of God but also as the Child of Humanity, the Human One. And so in his desert trial, Jesus models humility and trust in God, made for what Matthew Myer Boulton calls “a symbiotic reliance on God.” Each of Jesus’ responses to Satan calls back to Israel’s desert experience: the manna in the wilderness provided by God so that affluence would not convince God’s people that their success came by their own hand. Just like Israel, we are meant to trust God as a loving parent rather than devising tests to “prove” God’s care. And we are meant to see that God’s power exceeds all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

Rev. Lizzie writes that “We were born homesick,” longing to return to the place that is our true home. That is not to say you are bad or wrong, only that you don’t have to crawl through the desert on your hands and knees to get there. Each of us ends up walking through a wilderness at some point or points in our lives, so it’s good to know what our walking kit should contain. Not willpower. Not a thousand rules to follow perfectly. Just a trust that there is always someone to walk with you. You can even bring chocolate. Amen.