

This is the story of how I tempted the devil. It is true.

When I was about 5 years old I was swinging on my swing set in the backyard and thinking about things, like you do when you're 5. And I got to thinking about the devil. I wondered if perhaps the devil was so bad because no one had ever invited him to be good. Well I decided right then and there to have a talk with the devil.

How does one begin a conversation with the devil?

"Dear devil," I said. "Why don't you try being good? It would make everything better. You wouldn't have to stay away from God anymore, and I'm sure God would forgive you if said you were sorry. Just in case no one has ever asked you this before I thought I'd ask now..."

How does one end a conversation with the devil?

"Amen," I said.

And not too much time passed before the devil answered me.

The devil said no.

You've heard the saying "don't try to kid a kidder." Well don't try to tempt a tempter. Because that's what the devil is in our Scripture stories today. He is the tempter.

Is there anyone who doesn't know what the word temptation means? Well for those who are pure of heart, temptation is wanting to do something that you know you shouldn't, because it's wrong or would hurt you or get you in trouble in some way. When we're tempted we have to make a choice – we either resist by saying no or we give in, by saying yes to that temptation.

In the Bible the devil is always trying to lure God's people away from God, to make them doubt that God loves and forgives them, to get them to think they don't need God in order to be good. Has anyone here ever been tempted to think

that maybe God doesn't love them as much everybody say God does? Well that's not Jesus talking, I'll tell you. That's *you know who*.

Now the tempter, he knows that everyone is different and has different weaknesses. If for example if he put out a plate of fruitcake, and tried to lure me into eating it and spoiling my dinner, he wouldn't succeed. Because I don't like fruitcake. But if he set out a lovely slice of apple pie with maybe a little vanilla ice cream to go with it, well I'd have my work cut out for me resisting that temptation.

The devil is good at his job. He's been doing it a long time, really from the beginning.

In the Garden of Eden at the very start of creation, temptation took the form of a twisty, tricky snake -- the wisest animal in the garden. Now I'm not sure why the snake wanted to trip Adam and Eve up. Perhaps he was jealous of their relationship with God. Perhaps he was too smart for his own good. But he wanted to tempt the first people into breaking the rules that God had put in place to keep the Garden of Eden running smoothly. They were not to eat from the fruit of two trees in the garden: the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life.

It wasn't even that this was Adam and Eve's favorite fruit -- because they never tasted it. It's that they were curious about whether they would really get in trouble if they ate something that was forbidden. And the snake, he convinced them it was worth the risk.

You see when God put those trees in the Garden of Eden what he really planted for Adam and Eve was a choice -- a choice to obey God and stay with God and to embrace the life they had been given. And a choice to reject all that.

At the moment Adam and Eve were tempted to eat that fruit, they could have said no, and resisted temptation. I wonder if every other day they had said no to that temptation in some way. But one day, temptation won out. And they gave in. And as a result they faced CONSEQUENCES.

Who here has ever faced CONSEQUENCES as the result of what they have done? Me too.

God entered humanity as Jesus in order to reverse those consequences that people struggled with ever since, to give people a way back to a full life with God.

Not even Jesus escaped temptation and its choices, as we heard in our Gospel today.

Now who here knows what happened to Jesus before he went to the desert to pray? ... He was baptized. The baptism of Jesus was this great moment when the whole trinity showed up – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus, God the Son, came up from the baptismal water in the Jordan; God the Father said this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased, and God the Holy Spirit landed on Jesus' head to make sure everyone knew who God was talking about.

And then the Holy Spirit did something really strange. The Holy Spirit sent Jesus directly to the desert so Jesus could get tempted. Jesus would be tempted with the same things that God's people, Israel, were tempted with when they were wandering around in the desert so long before. Why would the Holy Spirit send Jesus to do that? I think it was so that Jesus could get some Temptation Resistance Training – TRT.

The first thing Jesus did in the desert was set aside 40 days to pray and pray, in order to make sure he was of one mind and one heart with his Abba, God. During that time he didn't eat, in order to make his body really weak and hungry and vulnerable, so that he was relying on God for his strength. That's when the devil showed up armed with doubts and choices and challenges to tempt into Jesus, testing whether he was God's son, and whether he needed God the Father at all.

*If you're really the son of God, why don't you use some magic to turn these stones into bread and feed yourself, rather than relying on God to feed you?*

*If you're really the son of God, why don't you throw yourself down from the top of the temple to see if the angels will catch you before you hit the ground?*

*If you really care about reaching the whole world, why don't you give your heart and mind to me, rather than do things the hard way with God?*

In each of these three temptations, Jesus had to make a choice. That's what we all have to do when we're tempted –we have to make a choice. And because Jesus knew the mind and heart of his Father God, and because Jesus was relying on God

for his strength despite his hunger, he said no to the devil. And he said yes to God. And the devil went away, and the angels brought him takeout.

That's Temptation Resistance Training. And that's one of the things we do in Lent – we practice resisting temptation. Like Jesus, we set aside 40 days. And we pray and pray, because that helps us to get our hearts and minds one with God. And we fast, we give something up, something that's a little challenging, something we'll want. And every time we want that thing, we practice making a choice. Because resisting temptation in little things or big things takes practice.

Now we're not fools. We don't invite the devil himself to come on in to tempt us so that we can see how good we are at resisting evil. We know that the world's temptations will find us soon enough without us going looking for them. But Lent gives us more of a controlled environment in which to practice our faith, to strengthen our spiritual muscles, to get ourselves into the habit of relying on God's grace and wisdom rather than our pride and ignorance. Lent reminds us of our limits and our weaknesses and the promise of God to forgive us and to heal us and to restore us. We are reminded during Lent that we need saving.

Relying on God through prayer and through acts of saying Yes to God, remembering the stories of the ways that God saves God's people over and over again are practices that give us the strength to get through those tough stories of Holy Week that follow Lent. In those stories, Jesus seems to be utterly defeated, ultimately dying on the cross. That Lenten practice gives us the courage to look into the tomb on Easter morning to witness what it looks like when God keeps God's promises.

Oh, there will be plenty of forces to try to tempt us to side with some other god – the god of popularity, or success, or progress, or perfectionism, or power. But that's why we need Lent's Temptation Resistance Training. It helped Jesus. It will help us too.

Amen.