

1) In my early religious education, the meaning of TEMPTATION was clear.

It was summarized in a hymn we sang.

Don't worry—I'll spare you the singing.

Don't worry—It's not as long as The Great Litany.

Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin/Each victory will help you some other to win.

Fight manfully onward, dark passions subdued/Look ever to Jesus, he'll carry you through.

Here's what those sing-song phrases were saying:

1) Temptation is STRONG DESIRE in conflict with CLEAR DUTY—

What you WANT to do—against what you KNOW you OUGHT to do.

2) Resisting temptation means bringing EMOTION under the control of REASON—

a task that demands the sheer force of WILL—

Jesus being the Quintessential Will Power Booster:

If JESUS can resist temptation, by God, so can I.

So I WON'T have a second piece of chocolate pie—just a little sliver.

3) TEMPTATION is both a SOLO struggle, and a COMPETITION.

Something to be resisted “by yourself” against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Don't follow the crowd, we were admonished,

even if everybody else does it—you must do BETTER.

TEMPTATION—a battle of desire against duty—desire to be vanquished by spiritual muscle.

JESUS did that—so don't give in.

This view of temptation influenced the way we heard this morning's Gospel story.

Alone in the desert, the stomach of Jesus cramps with hunger.

The devil whispers: *You WANT it—GO for it!*

But Jesus responds with an iron will: *I know I SHOULDN'T—So I WON'T!*

This reading of the story, I've come to think, leaves MUCH to BE desired.

As Luke tells the story, the Temptation of Jesus is:

- Not about DESIRE against DUTY, but about just WHAT his duty IS.
- Not a challenge to WILL POWER but a challenge of DISCERNMENT
- Not a story of how Jesus is SUPERIOR to others
but about how he is CONNECTED to others.

2) In tempting Jesus, the devil isn't playing with his passions, he's messing with his mind.

At this point in Luke's story, Jesus has just been baptized.

With not one credit yet to his name, Jesus has heard a voice from heaven:

You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Jesus hasn't proved how good he is—hasn't earned a thing—God's love for him is sheer gift.

And all the devil does is invite Jesus to figure out what that love means on the ground.

If God is please with you, the devil says, that pleasure surely must include

- *God's special provision for your basic needs*
- *God's special power for your worthy endeavors*
- *God's special protection for the strategic risks you need to take.*

So, MAKE FOOD, TAKE CONTROL, SHOW YOUR STUFF.

NOW—before he’s done—Jesus will, go far beyond each of the devil’s temptations:

- **Feed thousands, not just one.**
- **Claim a world kingdom AGAINST the devil**
- **Not throw himself down, but get strung up—and rise alive on the other side.**

What the devil proposes is so close—it’s hard to tell the difference!

3) PRECISELY—THAT is what a TEMPTATION is—a counterfeit.

It LOOKS like the real thing to all but the most discerning eye.

What, then IS the devil’s counterfeit?

His invitation for Jesus to employ the gifts of a loving God

in a way that puts a distance between himself and God the giver.

And an invitation for Jesus to put a similar distance between himself and his fellow creatures, by operating OVER them.

At his baptism, God has totally identified with Jesus.

The devil proposes that Jesus take this identification WITH God, and use it in ways that will leave him isolated FROM God.

THAT, rather than “dark passions” we need to “subdue”—that is what we face in temptation; namely—to use our gifts in ways that cut our connections with God and one another.

4) In telling the story of Jesus’s baptism, Luke takes pains to say

that Jesus is only one of a large company of candidates who line up for the rite.

The Spirit of God descends on him [quote] *when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying.*

Luke then immediately goes off on a seeming tangent—a sixteen-verse side track—a genealogy that names Jesus as “the son of the son of the son”—citing seventy-seven generations of his parents.

(I’d read you all their names; but that WOULD take longer than the Great Litany!)

Luke interrupts his story line—no, Luke UNDERSCORES his story line—

by showing explicitly that Jesus is connected to God through a human family tree.

What the devil suggests, oh so subtly,

is that Jesus can have the power that COMES from love, without the loving family connection.

And Jesus tells the devil: *You can’t fool me—I have roots—I am deeply connected.*

5) In our culture, where preoccupation with self-definition is a default, today’s lesson from Deuteronomy seems unintelligible.

I am not my ancestors. I was not in Egypt. I grew MY crops, ALL BY MYSELF.

And sacred tradition says, in no uncertain terms: *THAT is a dangerous TEMPTATION.*

In who we are, we’re more connected than we often recognize or admit.

Our inability to affirm those connections, is a diabolical deception.

Today, by praying in community the Great Litany in its entirety,

we take a page from Luke’s account of Jesus, and declare:

We ARE connected to the many concerns of our community— and we hold those concerns before God—each and every one.

**The season of Lent is about developing disciplines that embody this connectedness.
About undertaking creative ways, with our Creator, and with our fellow creatures,
to discern, develop, and deepen those life-nurturing, love-giving connections.
Lent, in short, is about taking the Great Litany from the church into the world.**