

{NOTES, NOT FULL TEXT}

1) When I was in grade school one of my classmate had a father who was a magician. He would sometimes put on special performances for neighborhood kids. Mr. Suddeth was small, lithe, with wrinkly skin, piercing eyes, and a gravelly voice. Before performing a trick he would always say: *Now watch closely, because the closer you watch, the less you see.* We would stare all the more intently—and he always tricked us anyway.

When God catches Eve red handed after eating the forbidden fruit, Eve defends herself with what sounds like a poor excuse: *The serpent tricked me.*

That is actually a perfectly reasonable explanation.

2) When we hear stories of temptation, it's easy to become a Monday Morning Moral Quarterback. From a safe narrative distance, the choices recounted today seem slam/dunk simple:

- *Don't bite the apple, Eve; just say NO! — She did it anyway; how dumb!*
- *Don't get snookered, Jesus, even when you're starving!—  
Good for you, Jesus, we knew you wouldn't cave!*

That makes it sound like temptation is obvious when you meet it on the street.

If folks yield—they knew better—or they should have. But that take on temptation turns it into something trivial—temptation is, well, tricky.

3) Sometimes we “know better,” but “do it anyway”---we can be:

- Overt in our rebellion: *I'll catch it for violating curfew, but I don't care!*
- Complicit in our seduction: *Too much chocolate TASTES so good!*

But a real temptation is one we hardly recognize, if at all—  
because EVIL can be described in three images:

- A cancerous growth—that contains an element essential to life, but is out of balance, and running amok.
- A counterfeit coin: a closest possible parallel to the “real thing.”
- (Thanks to Mr. Suddeth) A conjuring trick: a diversion of attention away from the insidious element to the genuine good with which it's closely connected—a quick illustration from then and now.
  - With a bright, eager Eve, the serpent is a master moral magician  
*Good for food, Delight to the eyes, Desired to Make One Wise*
  - At a recent Sunday 9:15 gathering, we noted that while we need to challenge politicians who hurl vicious personal insults, repudiating their bullying tactics can easily turn into similar-sounding attacks on them.

4) Where's the EVIL in today's temptation stories? To identify, first need to NAME the GOODS of which these temptations are subtle perversions:

- **TURN STONES TO BREAD:**  
Procure resources necessary for nourishment
- **JUMP FROM THE TEMPLE TOP:**  
Take a calculated risk for a good cause—  
knowing someone you trust has your back.
- **RULE THE WORLD:**  
Exercise influence that shapes events to make a difference.

A leader at a conference recently attended by Cricket and Geoffrey put it thus:

- **STONES TO BREAD—**  
an appeal the universal human need for SECURITY and SAFETY
- **THE TEMPLE TOP PLUNGE—**  
an appeal to the universal human need for AFFECTION and ESTEEM
- **WORLD DOMINATION—**  
An the universal human need for POWER and CONTROL

What about Eve's temptation to eat fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? The Serpent is "crafty" indeed—Asks Eve to ingest the very wisdom she needs to tell the difference between reaching out responsibly for a NEEDED HAND-UP; and being TRIPPED up by the serpent's own SLIGHT-OF-HAND. If she eats the fruit that will give her wisdom, she has given into the temptation; but she needs the wisdom to recognize the temptation for what it is. The serpent has, in effect, created for Eve a moral Catch-22—she is, it seems, damned if she eats, and damned if she doesn't.

**Bottom Line:** Temptations ARE tempting precisely because they make bogus but plausible promises to provide what we genuinely need to survive and thrive.

- 5) So where's the element of EVIL in these temptations? Two standard responses: evil is simply SELFISHNESS or evil is DISOBEDIENCE—both TOO simple.
- Eve's choice ISN'T selfish  
The first thing she does is offer the fruit to the only other person living/
  - Disobedience of Divine Command  
Eating was wrong just because God said so—but that begs the question:  
Does mere cosmic might make for absolute moral right?  
(What makes the serpent/magician's words especially tempting is his  
suggestion that God is being an Omnipotent Moral Drill Sergeant:  
*Don't eat it or you die.*)
- 6) So, again, where—in these temptations—is the cancerous growth, the counterfeit coin, the conjuring trick?  
Try this: All the genuine "goods" the tempter suggests are to be undertaken outside the bonds of trusting relationship. The temptation is not so much *do this for yourself*, as *do this by yourself—be a Lone Ranger, a solo performer, an individual detached from connection with God and with others.*  
It's interesting that, up to this point, Adam, and Eve have walked and talked with God every evening.

The serpent tricks Eve into treating as **ARBITRARY PROHIBITIONS** what God intends as **GRACIOUS PROTECTIONS**.

Taking the bait, drives a wedge of distrust between the humans and God. Adam and Eve now instinctively hide from God, and from each other.

7) What Jesus **RESISTS** in the temptations, he readily **DOES** in other settings

- **Stones to Bread:** Little bread turned into much bread
- **High Temple Jump:** Hangs high a cross for all to see, and is raised in resurrection.
- **World Power Trip:** Tells his disciples, after the resurrection, that *All power IS given to me*—and he promptly shares it; *go make disciples*.
- **Knowledge of Good and Evil that Eve is tricked into snatching:** Jesus gives it freely in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the Parables of the Wheat and Tares, the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, the Sheep and the Goats.

What makes the difference between the **REJECTED EVIL** and the **CHOSEN GOOD** in all these cases? The determination of Jesus not to act in **ISOLATION**, but in close **CONNECTION** with God and with His Covenant Community

8) But if evil is so devilishly hard to detect,

- Why does God let the serpent loose in the garden without first giving Adam and Eve a crash course in moral discernment?
- Why, right after His baptism, and being pronounced as God's Beloved Child, does God's Spirit lead Jesus into wilderness to be tempted?

Is this, for all of them:

- a threat from God: *I won't really love you unless you pass a purity test?*
- a demand from God: *Knuckle under to my ultimate but arbitrary power!*

Or might God be offering space to grow into what can't be swallowed like a pill, (or even dispatched by a descending dove and a voice from heaven).

Maybe God invites Adam, Eve—and Jesus—into an adventure of discovery, one that requires learning a set of practices, forming a pattern of habits undertaking, over time, a process of discernment—  
a process like what the church calls **LENT**, a season in which, together, we develop disciplines of community connection.

9) Lenten disciplines are sometimes misconceived, misrepresented, as demanding, even punitive regimens with religious sounding names—  
disciplines we must grit our teeth and do “all by ourselves”:

- **FASTING**—strict diets to atone for spiritual self-indulgence
- **PRAYER**—“Time Out's” for sacred but solitary reflection
- **ALMSGIVING/WORKS OF MERCY**—pushups to pump up moral muscles

Don't buy it—that's the trick of an evil magician.

Lenten disciplines are ways to shift our imaginations away from behavior patterns that ensnare our attentions so that,

as Mr. Suddeth would say: *The closer we watch, the less we see.*

To the devil's temptations about security and safety, affection and esteem, power and control  
Jesus responds: *I choose to see reality in a deeper, wider, more connected way.*

**BUT** in Matthew's telling, it's after forty days that Jesus resist these temptations,  
discerns the evil intermixed with the good, differentiates the evil **FROM** the good.

For us also, this journey in discernment isn't one we can undertake

by just reading a book, saying a prayer, listening to a sermon.

**SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT JUST TAKES TIME, and PRACTICE**

If **JESUS** can do that—**WE** can do that,

not "all by ourselves," but in and with this community.

Welcome to the practices of Lent.

Through them, we gain a deeper, wider, clearer look

at love and life, at ourselves and each other—

and a growing, more nourishing, more liberating vision of God.