

Whatever you do, don't push that button!

Genesis 2:15-17; Matthew 4:1-11

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Human nature is – well, HUMAN nature. There are some things that are just built into us and you know there has to be a reason, right?

Imagine this: I'm going to put you in an empty room, with nothing on the walls. I'll sit you at an empty desk and in the middle of the desk, a little closer to your side than the other, there is a big red button... and I say to you, look you are free to wander, you can stay or you can go but whatever you do, don't press that button. Now, the rest of you come with me behind the one-way glass and watch.

Watch – temptation. Maybe you will and maybe you won't touch that button but the hesitation will show all over your body like a day-glow overcoat.

God knows us. What did he think would happen when he said - "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."¹???

Whatever you do, don't push that button. I don't buy this as the fall"; that everything bad that happened to humankind after the Garden of Eden was because Eve disobeyed.

I see this as the first test – the first temptation...and in choosing knowledge, humans chose adulthood, responsibility. Never again would things be naïve and simple but require investigation and discernment. Never again would God wrap them in cotton wool but rather, humans would have to discriminate between good and bad and take responsibility for determining their actions. The world of possibilities just became much larger.

God didn't forget how curious we are. Did God suspect that to deny us something would make us crave it immediately? Surely God knew what would happen – it was only a matter of *when*. The threat that She would die – it didn't happen, not then. They went on to live lives with access to knowledge and ultimately wisdom – not in a child-like state. Our eyes were open to both good and evil. Responsibility had been bestowed on us so we were no longer intellectually naked.

¹ Genesis 2:16-17 NIV

No, I don't see the story of the garden of Eden as the fall – I see it as the gift that a parent gives their children, raising them so that they can survive in this world. And the final gift? Clothing that was useful for a larger habitat. Handy.

Testing – as in metal tells us about our strength and readiness...and so, we move to Jesus in the desert.

When I was in teacher's college, we did this whole educational theory intensive that basically said the way we use exams in higher education is worthless. It doesn't tell you anything about what a student understands but rather tests their ability to do exams. Believe me, I taught high school and the private schools would give the kids sample HSC English literature questions (remember there were set texts) and for a whole year, they would write essays; have the corrected and then memorise them. HSC students from fee paying schools would go into exams with about 4 memorised essays and all they had to do was match the essay to the question. They didn't have to think – they wrote by rote.

Anyway, at the end of our education theory intensive, you guessed it, ... we had an exam. You have to laugh.

For real insight, you have to see if the student is able to internalise and put into operation what they know. That is exactly what ha-Satan was doing with Jesus in the desert.

In Matthew, Jesus is given 3 tests and each one is both about his character and his relationship to God. The purpose of this exam is to figure out whether He is fit to lead as the Son of Man. Will he use his power for his own needs? Will He exploit his relationships? Will he seek fame and glory?

This is like a job interview – the 2nd round, where they really dig down into your character to see if you will fit the bill.

The devil is very clever – at least smarter than my lecturers at college because **this** test really did assess Jesus' understanding of the law.

Interestingly (and of course, I digress), the devil and the serpent have much in common. In the Genesis reading there are strong 'action' words around God, "God took.." " God commanded" " God put" – the serpent has no power at all, just words. It is like an earworm rather than a mighty snake. Pssst, you don't have to listen to your parents. He is cunning, calculated and manipulative but not scary.

In the Temptation, the devil knows his stuff. Not only does he know scripture, he understands human weakness...what things do we all crave? Recognition, safety, glory, riches.

My colleagues say the devil must be a reasonable man – in other words, someone in a red suit with horns is going to be just a bit too obvious. Real evil lurks in people who seem non-threatening and yet they know their stuff, are not scary and they are masters of manipulative behaviour. I think I know several people with toxic personalities who seem to be able draw people to them like moths to flame. They feed people's egos. They make others feel special. It's always in the words not the actions.

It is important to note that the serpent didn't die, nothing happens to him and the devil simply went away. Both are left to play again, perhaps in another time. Luke's Gospel is more explicit: "¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time."²

So why these two stories at the beginning of Lent? Because Lent is our annual exam. Are we willing to walk the long road with Jesus? We know what happened – are we still willing to commit?

This is the time of year when we are called to do our spiritual house-keeping. I've called this Lent *Running to Empty* because Jesus emptied himself of everything that led away from the cross. His journey was one of emptying.

We need to empty ourselves of clutter that distracts us from the season...can we empty ourselves of isms for a while? Can we notice the patterns we use to distract ourselves? Can we spend time in contemplation rather than beseeching prayer? Can we empty ourselves so that we can meet Jesus at the cross and on the road to recovery? For 40 days, is it possible to practice, 'it's not about me'? Is it possible to empty ourselves so that we might be fulfilled?

Gracious and wisdom God, help me move through the next few weeks shedding so I too, can be empty in anticipation – ready for you.

² Luke 4:13