

# Small Wisdoms

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Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

I don't remember the first time either of my children did something I had specifically told them not to do. I'm sure there was a first time. It's been lost amidst all the other times. It's one of the things my kids did as they grew – they knew that growing older meant shifting boundaries. Sometimes they'd test to see if the boundary had changed.

I remember that I didn't do some things when they did something I had specifically told them not to do. I didn't kick them out of the house, the way God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. Mind you, I did kick them out of the house eventually, when they'd graduated from college. But that wasn't a consequence of misbehavior, that was just a consequence of growing up.

So what small wisdom can we take away from the story of Adam and Eve? It's unwise to listen to talking snakes – which we don't have to worry about on an island that doesn't have land snakes. It's unwise to do things you've specifically been told not to do by God – that's certainly true, but you probably knew that already.

What happens after you do the thing God specifically told you not to do? You lose Paradise. You no longer live in a pristine world. The world is not a perfect place any more.

The world is not a perfect place.

It's wise to know that the world is not a perfect place.

When Jesus confronted his temptations, he already knew that the world was not a perfect place. He'd just been baptized by John the Baptist, who washed people in the Jordan River so that their sins might be forgiven. You don't need baptism in a perfect world.

But baptism doesn't change the reality of temptation. That's another small bit of wisdom. It's astonishing how many people have lived their lives with the conviction that because of their baptism (or something else baptism-like) they, and only they, were right. I struggle with that one all the time. I like to be right, I work to be right, I have a professional obligation to be much more right than wrong. Right?

If I let myself grow accustomed to being right, I'm at risk of shortcutting the work, or relying upon prior rightness to get me through changing conditions, or mistaking "I was right given what I knew" for "I was absolutely right," because I probably wasn't.

God's call. Baptism. Participation in the church. Success in work. Contributing to the harmony of a family. Leading in a community. None of that sets temptation aside. It's always there, and it leaps out when you least expect it.

"However we think of the devil," writes Warren Carter at Working Preacher, "the figure's presence in the Gospel personifies the vulnerability of human life and life in relation to God. No one, not even God's anointed agent, is free from having their identity and loyalty tested."

Jesus didn't escape temptation. You and I aren't going to, either. It's an imperfect world, and we are subject to temptation.

Temptation looks like good things. That's another small wisdom. Temptation isn't just shiny distraction. Temptation looks like blessing. In the case of Jesus, the temptations look like things he did later on. As Audrey West writes at Working Preacher:

Jesus refuses in the desert to turn stones into bread to assuage his own hunger, but before long he will feed thousands in the wilderness with just a few loaves and some fish (Matt 14:17-21; 15:33-38), and he will teach his disciples to pray to God for their "daily bread" (Matt 6:11).

He refuses to take advantage of his relationship to God by hurling himself down from the heights of the Temple, but at the end of his earthly ministry he endures the taunts of others (Matt 27:38-44) while trusting God's power to the end upon the heights of a Roman cross (Matt 27:46).

He turns down the devil's offer of political leadership over the kingdoms of the world, and instead offers the kingdom of the heavens to all those who follow him in the way of righteousness.

I've always found the last temptation, the realms of the earth, somewhat odd. The devil offered political power to someone he addressed as Son of God. Think about that for a minute. The Son of God already has power over the nations of the earth. The devil offered him what he already had.

Similar things happened in the other two temptations. Jesus had the power to create bread. He could have called the angels to him – and when the devil had gone away, they came without his call.

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Sometimes, what's tempting about it is a relief from labor or effort to achieve it.

Or, the temptation is to lift ourselves out of our humanity into some exalted condition.

As Debie Thomas writes at [JourneyWithJesus.net](http://JourneyWithJesus.net), "These days, I read the story differently. The devil doesn't come to make Jesus do something 'bad.' He comes to make Jesus do what seems entirely reasonable and good — but for all the wrong reasons. The test is a test of Jesus's motivations. A test of his willingness to identify as fully human, even as he is fully God."

Another small wisdom: Temptation urges us to be something other than fully human.

Temptation also invites us to raise others up to more than human. Jesus' last response to the tempter is to quote Deuteronomy 8: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." The devil has offered himself for worship, to be raised up above humanity and above whatever kind of being he is.

In addition, the offer to rule the nations ignored the people of those nations. What did they want or need? The devil didn't ask. Those people weren't important.

There's a pair of small wisdoms: It's temptation when you're invited to raise someone else higher than human, and it's also temptation when you're asked to treat other people as unhuman.

That's why all the "isms" – racism, sexism, homophobia, cultural imperialism, and so on – are so destructive. Each of them invites us to raise ourselves above other people by denying their full humanity.

Is there any small wisdom about resisting temptation? There is, but it's hard. I wish it was as simple as reading Scripture and holding onto its directions – and that's not simple. Plenty of faithful people well steeped in the Bible have fallen into temptation, myself included. I think the wisdom is, as best you can, try to resist temptation in company with other faithful, supportive people. Jesus did it alone, it's true, and at some point in the process there's nobody who can make the your decision for you. But Jesus did rely upon the religious tradition in which he'd been raised. He relied upon their recorded words and their recorded examples. He relied upon his relationship with God. He may not have summoned angels to him, but he trusted in their presence.

Jesus managed to resist temptation with those supports. Those might be enough for you and me. But as for me, I'm going to ask for more help if I possibly can.

There's another small wisdom here that's really uncomfortable. It's the wisdom to find power in weakness, security in vulnerability. In John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost*, he introduced the

Son of God as a terrifying figure casting lightning bolts at the rebellious angels. There's no sign of such a force in the Gospel accounts of the Temptation. A human, hungry Jesus faces a self-confident, more-than-human granter of wishes. It's also uncomfortable to note that these temptations foreshadow the end of Jesus' earthly ministry: bread that would represent his broken body, the nations triumphant over the Son of God, the Temple that gazed upon his crucifixion. As Amy Frykolm writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "True power is the mysterious path that Jesus walked. It comes with no guarantees. It is self-giving surrender, the strangest of paradoxes, and it leads to the cross."

That's a scary small wisdom.

It brings up one more small wisdom: that there really is resilience in the vulnerability, there really is strength in the weakness, there really is victory in the defeat. To quote an old hymn, there are angels hov'ring 'round. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Sometimes our journeys with God include dark places. Not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a fragile, broken world that includes deserts, and because God's modus operandi is to take the things of death, and wring from them resurrection."

The world is not perfect. Temptation is real and we are vulnerable to it. Temptation looks like good things, not just shiny things. Temptation often offers what we already have. We may be tempted to lift ourselves above our humanity, or to set someone else as superhuman, or to regard others as subhuman. As best you can, find help to resist temptation. Find power in weakness. Remember that from death God brings resurrection.

Small wisdoms to bring us through temptation.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*