

It had abnormally large eyes that would glow ever so slightly in the dark, it was much taller than I and quite strong. It had a low soothing voice that could easily lull you into a trance and then it was too late, by then you had fallen victim to a dread TEMPTATION and you would be forced to do terrible things that no good little boy or girl would dream of doing.

At least that is vaguely how I pictured such things when I was a child. The school in my home town of Byesville was staffed by Felican nuns who always seemed to come armed with lots of colorful stories to tell and it was easy for a child's imagination to become inflamed as they told tales of the dreadful things that people would do when they fell into TEMPTATION.

As I grew older I realized that the sisters were right about the possible serious consequences of yielding to temptation, but it was necessary to revise the image of the beast itself. An adult version of the story in the gospel today wouldn't picture the tempter as horned monster with a pitchfork. It would look a little more like this:

Imagine Christ in the wilderness. He is hungry and thirsty and tired. But most of all he is concerned about his ministry. How shall he proceed? How will he get people to listen to him? How shall he achieve his mission? As he sits alone there in the wilderness, his stomach empty, throat parched and mind full of questions, a stranger walks by.

This is no diabolical figure though, this is a friendly, well dressed professional looking type. He -- or there's no need to be sexist here it could be a she -- carries a brief case. He sits down at Jesus side with the all charm of a high priced lawyer, when he speaks it is reason itself advising you.

"You look like your having a difficult time, and your not really treating yourself very well. I think I can help. I have carefully analyzed the goals of your mission here and find that you have three strong objectives -- professionals always talk that way.

- 1] You are hoping to better the lot of humanity, especially the forgotten ones, the poor, the hungry, the outcast.
- 2] You would like all the world to acknowledge your kingship.
- 3] You would, of course, like to convert your own people and their leaders.

Hum... My report indicates that you happen to be the son of God, well that's certainly something we can use to your advantage here. For example you could turn these stones here into bread. Not just for yourself --but for all the hungry people of the world. They need you, they need a hero to give them hope."

And you know, I've been thinking. Its easy to convince the rabble, the little people, but the most important people to reach here are the Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin. You'll have to get their attention somehow.

I've got it; I think we need a really big promotional event! In the middle of their prayers you could just float down from the highest wall of the temple, after that they would believe anything you say, the nation would be yours.

Although, you know with your potential this is just the start of what you could accomplish, you really need to be king of more than just this little country. I can start making arrangements for a publicity tour that will turn the whole world your direction. This should work out just fine for what you need. It exactly what you mission calls for."

That all sounds really good – at first. But Jesus wasn't sent to bribe people with free bread. He would do miracles to point out God's love and mercy – but not to draw attention to himself. His message would go out to all the world but that would be the job of his disciples. The devil's easier, showier version sounded good but when you look at the consequences it wasn't really what God wanted at all.

It really is pretty easy to listen to the voices of reason and expediency. They are all around us. No one is really tempted by the thought of doing terrible things -- unless you're quite disturbed mentally. People **are** tempted to do what seems to bring the things they hope for and long for. Who would sit at the kitchen table and say "I think I should attempt to defraud the government and break federal law so that I can risk fines and imprisonment."

That doesn't have much appeal. But we do sit there and reason that everyone cheats a little on their taxes, and all the politicians keep saying that the tax system isn't fair anyway and things have been so rough lately, it would even things out a little if I made a few adjustments to my tax return.

It is easy for the noblest goals to be corrupted and temptation most always speaks with the voice of rational compromise. We are never explicitly tempted to hurt the ones we love or cause harm to others, but we are tempted to seek apparently good things without considering the cost or without worrying about eventual consequences. Wealth, importance, and influence can end up costing us family and friends, our health and our happiness.

It takes lots of practice to see spot temptation these days, the readings give some clues of where to start: Three statements of faith.

- From Paul comes the most basic creed we have -- JESUS IS LORD. Nothing else should hold a such a claim on our loyalty.
- In the gospel we find Jesus saying that it is GOD ALONE THAT YOU SHALL ADORE. Nothing else should be so valuable.
- And from the old testament comes the traditional statement of belief in a god who intervenes in history and does not abandon his people. Nothing else can promise more. Nothing else has the power to give meaning to our lives.

The readings give us some direction for learning to spot temptation. If even Jesus needed 40 day and 40 nights to face temptation, we don't have any time to lose this lent in trying to face whatever demons tend to lead us astray. But from the other side of the resurrection we also find strength and hope in knowing that we don't face the monster alone. We face temptation with the lord at our side, and he faced the monster and won.