

Shaped by Testing

I remember at least four things about my mom's cousin Charlotte. First, she was a good cook. I especially liked her creamed onions and her anise cookies, somewhat unusual foods for a child to enjoy. As I think back, the cookies were probably a version of peppernuts, but she didn't call them that.

Second, when she greeted me with a handshake, she wouldn't grip my hand. I'd have to do all the work of grasping and shaking. It was kind of like of like trying to grab onto a fish.

Third, her most frequent response to any topic of conversation was, "Isn't that nice?" This was quite amusing to my brothers and me because we had other relatives on that side of the family whose last name was Nice. (Talk about names that can be hard to live up to. I have Nice relatives on my mom's side and Good relatives on my dad's.)

The fourth thing I remember about Cousin Charlotte is that after she greeted each of us she would always, always say, "My, how you've changed." Kids are used to hearing this, of course. I'd groan inwardly and wonder why grownups always had to say that. (Now that I'm an adult I can't help but think the same thing about children I haven't seen in awhile. I try to resist saying it out loud, but I don't always succeed.)

What amused my brothers and me the most was hearing Cousin Charlotte say the same thing to my parents, "My, how you've changed." It was obvious to us that nothing was different about them – same height, same weight, same hair, same clothes. What kind of changes could she possibly have seen in our middle-aged parents?

As I think back on that time, I'm still not convinced Charlotte noticed any actual changes in the adults in our family. I am convinced, however, that changes did occur in each of us – parents included – between our visits with her.

Change is inevitable. As we live our lives each day, we're constantly being shaped by our experiences, our surroundings, our choices, our encounters with God, and by the very fact that we're human beings, whose bodies and systems are in a constant state of flux. Some of these changes are quite obvious, especially the physical ones. Others are more subtle – changes in attitude, in emotion, in spirit.

It's important for all of us, adults and teens and children alike, to have some awareness of what is influencing the changes that are happening inside our bodies and minds. We need to identify and recognize the internal and external forces that are shaping us. We need to be aware of what is influencing our "chooser." As followers of Jesus, we want to let his life, example, and spirit play a major role in this process.

We've now begun the season of Lent. The writers of the resources we're using introduce the theme, *Created in the Image of God, Shaped by Jesus*, in this way. *Lent is the season of the church year when we focus particular attention on foundational questions of existence. This Lenten season, we invite you to ask, What does it mean for us to be the created and re-created images of God?*¹

¹ Lent-Easter Worship Resources, *Leader, Winter 2022-2023*, ©2022 MennoMedia p. 36.

During the next six Sundays, we'll be exploring some experiences that shape us as well as some influences that draw us closer to God. Each year on the first Sunday of Lent we acknowledge that the time leading up to Easter is a season of testing – and that testing is a normal part of human existence. Testing is the theme of both of today's scripture texts.

Let's look again at the story from Genesis 3. Adam and Eve had a pretty good life. Their home was created just for them. It was beautiful. It was perfect. It was filled with good food. They were created for each other. They were a perfect match. And best of all, they got to spend time each day with their creator. They didn't have to wonder what God was like and what God wanted for them.

And then the serpent, the tempter, entered the picture.² "Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat *fruits* from the trees of the garden?" the serpent asked Eve.

"No," *Eve replied*, "God said we are free to eat the fruit from the trees in the garden. We are granted access to any variety and all amounts of fruit with one exception: the fruit from the tree found in the center of the garden. God instructed us not to eat or touch the fruit of that tree or we would die.

"Die? No, you'll not die," the serpent retorted. "God is playing games with you. The truth is that God knows the day you eat the fruit from that tree you will awaken *something powerful in you* and become God-like: possessing knowledge of *both* good and evil.

Now the only thing Eve wanted to eat was the *mouth-watering, wisdom-granting* fruit of the tree in the center of the garden. She plucked a fruit from the tree and ate. She offered *the fruit* to Adam who was close by, and he ate as well.

Suddenly their eyes were opened to a new reality. For the first time, they sensed *their vulnerability and rushed to hide* their naked bodies, stitching fig leaves into crude clothing.

Then Adam and Eve heard the sound of their creator walking in the cool shadows of the garden. Instead of going to greet God as they usually did, they took cover and hid. Instead of making them powerful and wise, their choice made them vulnerable and afraid.

Why did Adam and Eve choose to eat something that did not satisfy? Why did they choose the forbidden over the abundance available to them?

Compare this with the story from Matthew 4. Jesus' current living situation was not a good one. He'd been in the desert for a very long time. It was hot; it was windy; it was dusty. Jesus was dirty; he was smelly; he was exhausted; he was lonely; he was famished.

And then the adversary, the tempter, entered the picture.³ "If You are the Son of God," the tempter said, "tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus refused. "It is written in the scripture, 'Man does not live by bread alone. Rather, he lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the tempter dared Jesus to jump off a high building and test God's promise to protect him.

Again, Jesus refused to do what the tempter asked.

And still the adversary subjected Jesus to a third test. He offered Jesus all the splendor, glory, and power that any human could acquire in the world. All Jesus had to do was worship the tempter.

A third time, Jesus refused to do what the tempter asked. "I will worship and serve God alone," Jesus said.

Then the adversary left Jesus. And heavenly messengers came and ministered to Him.

² Story adapted from Genesis 3:1-7, *The Voice Bible*, © 2012 Thomas Nelson, Inc.

³ Story adapted from Matthew 4:1-11, *The Voice Bible*, © 2012 Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Why did Jesus reject the things that seemed to be just what he needed? He was hungry, vulnerable, and weak. Why did he reject offers of food, protection, and power?

At its core, temptation is a distraction luring us away from who God created us to be and from what God called us to do in the world. This isn't necessarily a measure of one's strength or weakness, although it does expose our vulnerabilities.

Two questions lie at the heart of this testing: Who are you? What do you really want?⁴

Who are you? This is how the tempter begins his challenge to Jesus. Many Bible translations begin the temptations with the phrase "If you are the Son of God . . ." The *Common English Bible* uses the word *since*, "Since you are God's son . . ." This time of testing comes immediately after Jesus' baptism. It seems likely the tempter is aware of God's affirmation of Jesus at that time, "*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*"⁵ The adversary knows who Jesus is and wants him to act in a way contrary to his true identity.

Let's shift the focus to each of us. Who are you? First and foremost, each one of us is a beloved creation of God. This fact gives dignity and worth to each person who lives – or has lived or will live – on this planet. We're required to recognize that this description of who we are applies to everyone – including each one of us.

Some of us tend to be too self-critical. Our inner accuser says, "You're not attractive enough, or good enough, or talented enough, or smart enough. Why would anyone love you, or listen to you, or want to be around you?"

Some of us tend to be too critical of others. Now we look outward and become the accuser, thinking or maybe even saying, "You're don't look right, or act right, or vote right, or speak right. No one should love you, or listen to you, or want to be around you."

If we're honest with ourselves, we know that each of us had times of being too self-critical and also too critical of others. But that's not how we were created to be. As God's beloved creation, we're to love God with all our being – heart, mind, soul, and strength, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbor as well.

We're invited to participate in the mission of God. This gives purpose to all human beings. We are to seek out the places and ways in which God is working out the mission of bringing shalom – peace, health, wholeness, completeness, right relationships – to all of God's creation. This includes shalom with God, within each person, between individual people, among groups of people on small and large scales, and within all of creation.

This part of who we are, with this purpose of joining in God's mission of shalom could – should – help us answer the second question.

What do you really want? It's easy to try to fool others and ourselves by answering the question the way we think we should. The true answer is often revealed during a time of temptation, a time of testing. This testing can also shape us, for better or worse, depending on our response. Testing reveals our inner essence, the alignment of our souls—what makes us tick.

In Adam's, Eve's and Jesus' testing their true passions are revealed. In both biblical accounts, the tempter presents desirable options and, on the surface, legitimate desires to each person. The way each one answers reveals what's going on inside – what they really want.

We can relate to this. All of us have desires and cravings; all of us have temptations. Being human means we will be tempted.

⁴ Parts of this sermon are adapted from Lent 1 Sermon Seeds, *Leader, Winter 2022-2023*, p. 39 and Lent 1 Sermon Seeds, *Leader, Winter 2019-2020*, p. 36.

⁵ Matthew 3:17, *New Revised Standard Version*.

Sometimes temptation comes in times of desperation. After spending a long time in the wilderness, Jesus was hungry. A mind-numbing, body-wilting hunger. *Then* comes the temptation: Tell these stones to become bread.

Women and men in abusive relationships, unemployed adults who can't afford basic goods and services, families living in places filled with violence; people overwhelmed with crisis—many in our world face temptation out of desperation. In times of despair, we may lack the energy or ability to seek God's way. In those situations, God's grace and mercy come into play. We have the opportunity to choose differently the next time around.

Sometimes temptation comes in ordinary times or even in times of abundance. The tempter came to Adam and Eve in a time of beauty and ease. A perfect life. Except, said the tempter, it could be even better. If you just reached for that one thing more, you would be *really* happy. It's not out of desperation, but abundance, that people often make choices that lead to ill health, broken relationships, economic exploitation, or environmental degradation. Again, God's grace and mercy and the opportunity to choose better are available.

It's likely that each of us has experienced or will experience both types of temptations – those that come out of desperation and those that come out of abundance. Sometimes the tempter will ask, "Why are willing to get by with simply enough, when you could have even more, when you could have everything?" Other times the question will be, "Why be desparate when you could be comfortable? Why not do it my way and have it all?" In all cases, we do well to follow the example of Jesus and answer, "I choose to live by the word of God. I choose to worship and serve God alone. I choose to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to me as well."

Temptation itself isn't evil. Our response to the testing is what matters. Most of us can resist *bona fide* evil when we see it. But most temptation is choosing not-so-good or even pretty good options rather than choosing God's best for us.

We all hunger for something – food, of course, but we also hunger for excitement, power, relationship, validation, pleasure. Much of what we desire is necessary to sustain life. The problems come when these things get out of balance, when we make not-so-good or bad choices in satisfying these hungers.

In our times of testing, the choices we make will clarify our answers to the questions of "Who am I" and "Who do I want to be." They will make us more clear about who we are with God and with each other. They will shape us.

As we become more aware of what circumstances make us vulnerable to the things that tempt each of us the most; as we engage in practices that increase our chances of making wise decisions in those times of testing; and as we move on from both our successes and our failures, we are shaped and transformed into someone a bit different than we were before.

My hope for each one of us is that when Cousin Charlotte says, "My, how you have changed," it's because we're growing closer to being the person God wants us to be.