

Hebrews 2:14-18

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

“Easter Elephants”

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I personally have never been attracted to the desert. Growing up, I was a Colorado girl through and through. Rafting, skiing, anything that had to do with precipitation, that was my cup of tea. So wouldn't you know it, that for my first appointment at a church, I was sent right smack in the middle of the desert of California, just twenty minutes from Mexico and Arizona. While I was living there, I would take my dog Jack out to the desert out to the desert to meditate, but each time, I would find something to distract me. So finally, after a few weeks of this, I resolved to go out to the desert and by golly, I wasn't going to take anything with me. I wasn't going to leave that place until I'd truly had a Godly experience. Whatever that was, I was going to have it. \

Then, out of the blue, just fifty yards away, came figures falling out of the sky. I could see the parachutes and faintly hear their voices. There in the desert, in the middle of nowhere, were men parachuting down from planes. After I took a moment to wipe my eyes and make sure I wasn't already seeing mirages, I saw a beat-up old bus coming up through the desert to pick them up. My first instinct was, "Thank goodness I'm not alone after all." It had been a whole twenty minutes by myself, and I was sick of myself. My

second and third thoughts, however, were not quite as joyous. They were ones of paranoia, perhaps with reason. Who were these men? Why were they parachuting into the middle of the desert, of all places, and so close to Mexico? I had no idea what was going on. And with that thought, I bolted. I called to Jack as quietly as I could, put him on his leash, and yanked him over to the car, and we drove off, and I hoped that no one had seen me and everything was okay. That was full paranoia, at that point. Thankfully, we made it back home safe, and that was the last time I went out to the desert. I had attempted to spend time in the wilderness to have a true Godly experience, and in the end, all I'd ended up doing was running away from myself in every way imaginable. Sometimes, that's what temptation is. The urge to get away from ourselves in any way possible, to avoid finding out who we are when no one else is around.

Which is what I think this passage from Matthew and, consequently, what Lent is all about. What our responses to those times when we have the choice to listen to that call of who we really are, or to bolt. The New Interpreter's Bible suggests that the true temptation for Jesus is not to simply feed his physical cravings but to prove that he could be the type of Messiah that everyone was expecting him to be. The one who would boost his own ego through acts of magic and secure his position of power in any manner possible. With Jesus' abilities, he could have it all. That was the temptation. But temptation, in and of itself, isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is something that can make us reflect on what is really important in our lives. As L.V. Cameron states, "God allows temptation because it does for us what storms do for oak trees, rooting us deeper. And it does for us what heat does for paint on porcelain, giving us long-lasting endurance."

Though this time in the desert was definitely not a fun time for Jesus, I like to think it was the time that most helped him to define his ministry. In the story, the devil, what we might instead call temptation, gave him all the arguments that he heard time and again throughout his life. "If you are the Messiah, then use your power. If you are the Messiah, then quiet your opponents with force. If you are the Messiah, don't waste your time on the deaf and the lame, but spend your time with those in power who can help you with their influence." In this time in the desert, amidst temptation, Jesus developed his response to all of these arguments, which he used over and over again. This experience helped to form and to strengthen who he'd be during his time on earth. Jesus comes out of the desert fully human and fully attuned to the God within him, strengthened by his faith. By placing the kingdom of God first, Jesus showed his true colors and met temptation in the face.

Which brings me to the elephant. You might have been wondering about the photos on the screen. They are all of elephants that were placed across London by a group known as Elephant Family, in an attempt to save the endangered Asian elephant. They decided that the best way to bring awareness to the problem was to hold this elephant parade, all over the city, in 2010, and make the issue as visible as possible. But I want to talk about a different kind of elephant, those elephants in our closets. You've heard the phrase. Those parts of our lives or our personalities that we do our very best to hide. Sometimes we even hide them in plain sight, but do such a good job of distracting others from seeing what is really there. It's just like the story of the businessman in Arabia who was

smuggling treasure across the border, and masterfully eluding the guards. Every day for four years, he would parade back and forth across the border, and with every crossing, the guards knew he was hiding something expensive that he would sell for outrageous amounts on the other side of the border. But despite their thorough searches, and despite the fact that they could see that he was prospering, they could find nothing in the saddle of the donkey that he rode. Finally, years later, after the man no longer could get in trouble for his crimes, the frontier guard said, "Okay, you can tell me now. What is it that you were smuggling?" The businessman smiled broadly. "My dear friend," he said, "I was smuggling donkeys."

Geneen Roth, the author of *Women, Food and God*, describes such behavior in her book. She explains, "It's hidden in plain sight, the open secret. Every day we are in touch with that which is broken or not broken. But we are so busy paying attention to the million details of day-to-day life, that we miss it. Whether we name it or not, it is still there. Whether we pay attention to it or not, it does not go away." Geneen admits having an obsession with food her entire life, whether it be with eating too much, or dieting to excess. She admits, "I turned to Hostess Snowballs, those pink marshmallowey things with coconut on them, the same year that I gave up on God. The sight of a Hostess Snowball turned the world into a riot of color. I turned to food for the same reasons that people turn to God. It was my sigh of ecstasy, my transport to heaven. My concrete proof that relief from the pain of everyday life was possible. And then it would be gone. The cellophane packages would be empty on the floor, the bits of coconut stuck in my teeth, and I'd convince myself that the reason I didn't have parents that held hands at parades was because I was fat. And so I started dieting the same year I started bingeing. Dieting gave me a purpose. Bingeing gave me relief from the relentless attempts to be someone else. Dieting was like praying. It was a plaintive cry to whoever was listening." She continues, "When you believe without knowing you believe that you were damaged at your core, you also believe that you need to hide that damage for anyone to love you. You walk around ashamed of being yourself. You try hard to make up for the way you look, walk, feel. These are the voices inside of us that tell us we are unworthy, broken beyond repair. But they are just figments of our imagination, phantom voices from years past, that come back to haunt us every now and then."

Elephants in the closet. When those unpleasant areas of our lives start creeping up, it is often so tempting and so easy to answer to the million other things out there going on in our lives, and to run away from it. We can choose to ignore the problem altogether, or to paint a pretty picture for everyone to see, simply resulting in an elephant all painted with pretty colors like an Easter egg, but despite the paint, it is still an elephant. And sometimes we do this very same thing through the way that we practice Lent or accomplish any goal. We can place so much emphasis on the caffeine or the cigarettes or on the running five miles a day, but we don't pay attention to the symptoms beneath, the reasons why we crave those cigarettes, or haven't been taking time out to be healthy, those negative feelings that we just push down deeper and fill the need that they create with unhealthy habits.

And then, getting rid of the unhealthy habit then becomes the goal, and still the reasons behind it are ignored, and we come out of Lent and into Easter with our elephants right behind us, painted nice and pretty for all to see. Proud of our forty-day accomplishment, but still coming to Easter Sunday feeling, well, less than transformed. So maybe what we need most, this Lent, is to just take a few moments out to question these feelings. Why am I feeling this way? How long have I felt this way? When we take time to acknowledge those feelings about our past, and to decipher which thoughts that are just remnants from our past, we can then grow to know our true selves and to love that person without judgment or the compulsion to cover it up. The difficulty, once we realize who we are to be, is to just be comfortable with who we are. And who we aren't.

Former president Jimmy Carter tells a story about his brother Billy and how he dealt with being the brother of a famous politician. During the summer of 1976, Jimmy had just been nominated as the Democratic candidate for president, and their small home town of Plains, Georgia was crawling with reporters, many of whom frequented his brother Billy's service station in order to ask him some questions. One reporter dared to ask Billy if he agreed that he was somewhat of an odd duck. Billy replied, "My mother went to the Peace Corps when she was 68 years old. My younger sister is a holy roller preacher. My other sister is eight years older than I am and spends half her time on a Harley Davidson motorcycle, and my brother, well thinks that he's going to be the president of the United States. I'm the only one in my family who is normal." And perhaps he gained that healthy perspective and sense of humor from his mother, who, when told that she must be very proud of her son, said simply, "Yes. Which one?"

In a world where one's self-esteem is often measured by the degree of one's accomplishments, perhaps this mother's answer does seem a bit peculiar. But it doesn't take becoming president to have a healthy sense of self. All it may take is discovering who and where we are, and staying planted, no matter how big the temptation is to run away. To fall to temptation is to believe the world when it says that we are broken, unfixable, and unworthy. And then to go about our lives as if that were true. Out there in the desert, Jesus was told that he wasn't a precious son of God who is already as full of love as humanly possible. He was told that the only way to truly gain love was to meet everyone else's expectations of what it means to be a son of God and to be the Messiah. But Jesus didn't listen, thanks be to God And neither need we. We are children of God, filled to the brim with love and grace. This Lenten season, let us look at one area in our lives where we might feel a little bruised or broken, and simply examine it and ask questions. Perhaps it will arise through our body's cravings, perhaps not. Then, just simply hold that piece of brokenness with care and compassion. No judgment, no wishing things were different. And when we're ready, perhaps we can talk to someone we trust about it and begin to work through what we're feeling. Then, come Easter Sunday, may we each walk into this space feeling a little more whole, a little less weighed down, with no elephants trailing behind. Some this Easter, may the only thing we feel the need to paint and hide, be eggs. Thanks be to God.