

**February 13, 2005**  
**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11**  
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**“Angels in the Wilderness”**

A moral philosopher named Dennis the Menace once said, “I like being a good boy, I just wish I were better at it.” Isn’t it the truth! No matter how hard we try, we do the very things we hate. We know what’s right and wrong. We have a hard time choosing the good when the bad is so appealing. That’s how it was for Adam and Eve.

God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed. God gave them clear limits. God warned them to stay away from the things that would harm them. God created Adam and Eve with freedom, but there were limits to their freedom. To be created human is to be a finite creature that lives in space and time. We didn’t create ourselves. We didn’t make the world. We didn’t choose the number of human senses or determine the nature of human emotions. Life is a complete gift. We don’t make the rules. Yet, we are tempted to live in this world as if we did. Our daughter’s first complete sentence was an emphatic, “I do it myself!” Are we so different? We want the freedom to do what we want, when we want and with whom we want.

Adam and Eve had everything they needed, but not everything they wanted. They wanted to “do it themselves.” Temptation came in the form of the serpent that intentionally misquoted God, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” Temptation always distorts reality. In correcting the serpent, Eve’s eye is drawn to the fruit of the one tree she cannot have. When we are tempted, we do not see things clearly. Our judgment is clouded and our senses are heightened. The thing we desire becomes the most important thing in the world. The object of our desire draws us like a magnet. Eve adds her own distorted prohibition, “God said that we shouldn’t even touch the tree or we will die.”

“No, you won’t die! You’ll be like God. You’ll make the rules from now on. You’ll decide what’s good and what’s bad, who’s in and who’s out, what’s fun and what’s not.”

Nothing had ever looked as good as that forbidden fruit. It was a “delight to the eyes” and it “would make her wise.” She ate it. She gave it to her husband. He ate it. Suddenly, their world collapsed. They traded Eden for a wilderness of their own making. All the wisdom, pleasure and fulfillment they sought turned into foolishness, alienation and shame. Later, they hid from God. When God said to Adam, “Where are you,?” God wasn’t asking a question about his geographical location. God was asking about Adam’s heart and soul: “Where are you now that you are so far from me?” When God asked them why they did what they did, they passed the buck. Adam blamed Eve and then blamed God for giving Eve to him. Eve blamed the serpent. We’ve been passing the buck ever since.

What happened? In trying to be like God, Adam and Eve became less than God had created them to be. In turning from God and in trying to live in the world on our own terms, we distort what it means to be human beings created in the image of God. As Shirley Guthrie has written in *Christian Doctrine*, to be human is to be created to live in a loving relationship with God and with other people. Guthrie writes:

What we learn from Jesus, then, is that to be truly human in the image of God is not to possess some intellectual, moral, or spiritual capacity *within* ourselves; it is realized only in relatedness, community, or fellowship with others *outside* ourselves. We cannot be human by ourselves in independent, self-sufficient loneliness. Only as we discover the meaning of our very existence in relatedness to God and fellow human beings can we be truly human. (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 198)

To understand what it means to live a human life we look not to Adam and Eve, but to Jesus Christ. The Scripture says that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, but without sin. In Adam and Eve we see how we have fallen short of God's plan for our lives. In Jesus Christ, we see the full potential of our humanity.

In the story of the temptation of Jesus, Satan tempts Jesus to be less than he can be. The tempter does not really question the power or identity of Jesus. The tempter knows he is the Son of God. The phrase, "If you are the Son of God," can be translated, "Since you are the Son of God." Satan's temptations pose the question, "What kind of Son will you be?" Satan tempts Jesus to use God's power to serve his own needs by satisfying his hunger. Satan tempts Jesus to use his power to prove that he really is the Son of God by throwing himself off the Temple and letting the angels save him. Finally, Satan tempts Jesus to give up on establishing the kingdom of God through suffering and to settle for ruling the kingdoms of this earth through power.

Jacques Ellul has noted that the drama of the temptation of Jesus turns on this question of how Jesus will live as God's Son. Both Satan and Jesus quote Scripture. The words of Jesus come from the speeches of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, Moses is reminding the people that God has called them to live as a covenant people. The path to life is found through faith and obedience to God. The path to death is found in forgetting who they are and to whom they belong. The words of Satan come from the Psalms, which speak of God care for and protection of the faithful. In other situations these words are quite true. The context is everything. Satan uses these words to tempt Jesus to be less than God calls him to be.

As Ellul has noted, the question is which script will Jesus follow? In quoting Moses, Jesus sees himself as God's son who is called to be God's servant. The tempter says Jesus is God's son who will be served and protected at all costs. The real temptation is not just to satisfy his hunger, or to display his power, or to exchange his kingdom for the kingdoms of this world. The real temptation is to be no longer the servant who gives his life for the world.

Temptation comes to us. Like the temptation of Adam and Eve, temptation finds its power in distorting the truth of things. “No one has ever loved me like this before!” “I didn’t have a choice.” “This is the only chance I will ever have.” We are tempted to live without God, make our own rules, and be less than we can be. Like the temptation of Jesus, temptation comes to us at the point of our weakness and need. “I’ll take a little bit just this one time.” “Even though it’s wrong, it will help me reach my goal.” “I’ve got to find a way to prove that I’m the best one for the job.”

We are tempted to live our whole lives with the wrong script. In Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge spent his life living by the wrong script. He thought that making and hoarding money, even at the cost of his true humanity, was the real goal of life. One night he was awakened by a dream to live his life in a whole new way. Even the disciples were tempted to follow the wrong script. When Jesus told them that the messiah would suffer and die they couldn’t accept it. “Forbid it Lord!” Peter said. They knew another script by heart. They wanted to follow the messiah who would lead them to victory over the enemies of Israel and rule an earthly kingdom from a throne in Jerusalem. Jesus said, “If any would come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow me.”

We fall into the trap of thinking that God is there to smooth out the rough spots of life, keep us from harm, and make things easier for us. We have the wrong script! We are here to love God, serve others, and proclaim the gospel by how we live. Yes, God will bring us safely home, but it is by way of the cross. There are no shortcuts to abundant life and eternal glory.

When we are tempted to be less than God wants us to be, we look to Jesus to find our true humanity. We also remember that God provides for us in the temptations of life. At the very end of the temptation of Jesus is a verse that is easy to overlook: “Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.” Just when we think we are all alone in this wilderness of temptation, we discover that the ministering angels of God are all around us. As we ordain new deacons today, I like to think of our deacons as those who have a special calling to be God’s ministering angels to the sick and the troubled and to those in need in our church and community.

Whenever I have felt discouraged or overwhelmed by the challenges before me, God always seems to send just the right person to encourage me, write me a note, carry a burden, help with a difficult situation, correct me when I need it, pray for me, and remind me who I really am. Over the years, I have come to see these friends and strangers as God’s ministering angels. Without their care, I could not be faithful.

Sometimes temptation appears like a violent storm of trouble blowing hard upon us, pushing us away from our true course. I used to think that struggle and adversity make people stronger. They do. But I have also seen how trouble and tragedy can break people as well. When we face the winds of illness, dishonesty, cowardice, corruption, abuse and betrayal, remember that we have the stronger wind of the Holy Spirit to drive us toward our destiny. More often than not, temptation comes like the

gentle rain that seems so pleasing but gradually wears away soil and rock until the contours of our lives are changed. Temptation wears us down so gradually as to be almost imperceptible. It can wear away our faith and our closeness with God.

A dear friend in a former church had overcome a great deal in her life to become a very successful administrator. She had grown up in a deeply troubled and dysfunctional family. In her adult life, she had worked hard to overcome her anxiety, distrustfulness, low self-esteem and depression. She knew what it was to live in the wilderness and face the temptation to live by the wrong script, a script that said she was a worthless person who could never measure up to her mother's ever-changing expectations. One night the darkness almost overwhelmed her. She went into deep distress. Her loving husband called their friends to help. Her friends gathered around her and supported her. They encouraged her, loved her and prayed with her as she got the professional help she needed to discover again her own identity as God's beloved child. I will always think of those friends who saved her life as God's ministering angels who came to her in the wilderness of her life.

The secret of overcoming temptation is found not in relying on our own strength or in trusting our own feeble resources. The secret of facing temptation is found looking to Jesus in whom we see the image of our true humanity. In these wilderness moments of temptation know that all around us are God's angels who minister to our needs.