

I was watching the news and an ad came on.

A set of hands was opening up a large manila envelope, —  
the kind used to send legal documents through the mail.

But what the hands pulled from the envelope was not a document.

It was the thinnest imaginable, sleek looking Apple laptop computer.

I said to myself. “Now that is what I want.”

And in that moment I knew I was tempted.

Temptation is a constant in our lives.

Seeking the things we do not need, —

padding our expense account, —

sneaking out at night to meet that boyfriend, —

cheating on the test, —

cheating on our spouse, —

lying our way out of a tight place, — —

all of us know temptation.

But there seems to be something different  
in the story of Jesus’ temptation.

Jesus has just emerged from baptism, —

baptism in which he experienced a dove descending upon him

and heard a voice saying: —

“*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*”

“My Son, the Beloved . . . .”

It was an identity he did not choose.

It was given — given by God.

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A couple of weeks ago Cameron Vance was baptized here.

And we sang,

“*Cameron, Cameron, God claims you,  
God helps you, protects you and loves you too.*”

At baptism that is the kind of song that is sung about us from heaven.

We are people *claimed by God, claimed by God as God’s own people, —  
God’s beloved children.*

That is who we are.

That describes the *skin* we are given.

We do not choose this identity.

God chooses it for us.

We are a holy people, ones belonging to God  
to be God’s agents in this world.

That is our *skin* — our identity.

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Indeed, at times, many of us refuse to trust that this identity is true.

God certainly could not treasure *us*, trust *us*, claim us, call *us*, —  
to be God’s beloved, to be God’s agents in this world.

*Not us.* We’re not good enough. We’re not gifted enough.

We’re not faithful enough. Not us.

And so we choose to disbelieve God.

We deny our identity.

We run away from it.

But unlike we often do, Jesus did not run away from that skin God gave him.

He ran toward it.

And it is then that temptations confronted him.

For as one writer puts it, —

“Jesus is not tempted because he has departed from God’s will.

Jesus is in the desert because he was led by the Spirit.

Take a poll among the churches: —

it’s usually the obedient and not the disobedient

who are struggling, being opposed and tested.

The disobedient seem to have a knack for locating the cushions.”<sup>1</sup>

And though we often run away from the skin, — the identity, — God gives us, —

I wonder if deep down we are here and are participants in the church, —

worshiping God, and seeking to stretch our faith during Lent

because we are not running away from God.

We are instead earnestly seeking to discover what it means

to be ones claimed, treasured, and called by God.

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It is precisely when Jesus is doing that

that a voice emerges intent on twisting God’s truth.

The devil — or *slanderer* — speaks this voice.

And it is precisely when we are in the wilderness earnestly seeking

to understand the skin God has given us to live in

that this slanderer is likely to emerge — offering options, —

frankly good options — for the fulfilling of our calling.

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“If you are the Son of God . . .”

The devil could have easily said, “Since you are the Son of God . . .”

“Since you are God’s chosen

with a special calling to accomplish God’s purposes, —

*command these stones to become loaves of bread.*”

And why not do that?

Jesus had the power.

And Jesus was famished.

If he was to be God’s special agent in this world, —

does not Jesus need sustenance?

And is it not true that one very important way to serve God in the world

is to provide bread?

Just think what Jesus could accomplish for God

if he went around turning stones into bread, —

feeding the hungry?

And indeed, later in his ministry Jesus does feed the hungry.

He takes five loaves and two fish and multiplies them

so that they feed five thousand men plus women and children.

But then *who sets God’s purposes in the world?*

<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred B. “Testing that Never Ceases”, *The Christian Century*, Feb. 28, 1990, p. 211

And who is served by those purposes?  
Jesus, as the Messiah of God, is called to a *ministry of great size*.  
He is called to preach, to teach, to cast out demons, —  
to bind up the brokenhearted, to drink the cup of death, —  
not just for himself but for the *sake of the whole world*.  
And here in this test, a one scholar puts it, the devil is attempting  
to beguile Jesus into making the nature of his work *too small* —  
satisfying physical hunger, —  
and the recipients of his work *too few*, in this case only himself.

And that temptation still confronts us as we earnestly seek  
to live in the *skin* God has given us, —  
to be his servant people in this world.  
For what do we hear?

“If evangelism is not the first priority of the church, we have missed our calling.”  
Or, “Unless the church’s main focus is working for justice for the poor, —  
shelter for the homeless, — we are not doing the work of Christ.”

Or, “The heart of our mission must be nurturing our own faith  
and the faith of our children.

To do that we have to maintain our facilities  
and have the best children’s and youth program possible.”

Or, “The central act of the church is worship. Therefore, before all else, —  
we need to make sure the music, preaching, liturgy  
and space in which we offer worship is of the utmost quality”

Or, “Our primary calling is to be stewards —  
stewards of all that God has entrusted to us, —  
especially this globe that is now under such ecological threat.”

And how is it that we usually sort out which of these issues we pursue?  
Are our choices made *by our own hungers*, —  
*our own most immediate felt needs*?

“. . . . *command these stones become loaves of bread.*”

The temptation is to make God’s mission *narrow*, —  
to limit the priority of God’s calling  
to the needs we feel most urgently right now.

As good as that narrowed ministry might be, —  
as urgent as may be the needs we feel, —  
*whose place is it to set the agenda for God’s mission?*

To the devil, Jesus replies, —  
leaning on the teaching of God, written in scripture, —  
“One does not live by bread alone, —  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

*Every word.* God sets the agenda. And the agenda is vast.  
And Jesus knows it is not his place to limit that agenda.

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So the devil comes right back at Jesus.

“Okay! So one is to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.  
Well then, since you are the Son of God, —  
jump off of this pinnacle of the temple.  
For it is written right in Psalm 91

that God will send angels concerning you.

“On their hands they will bear you up, . . . .”

Now as the special agent of God in this world

sent to accomplish God’s purposes, —

why not do that

and therefore *prove to the world that God is trustworthy?*

Recently, in a colloquy on prayer at Union Seminary of which I am a part, —

a professor at the Medical College Virginia

presented a lecture on the scientific evidence for the efficacy of prayer.

He related the results of a detailed research project measuring

whether persons in hospital prayed for by others

recovered from illness more fully

than those in hospital for whom no one prayed.

The findings of the study he declared rendered no proof

that God answered prayer.

And to that many people in the audience reacted.

They stood up and countered this scientist.

It seemed they had been *given a mission to prove* that God was faithful

and that God did answer prayer.

What about us who earnestly are seeking to live in the *skin* God has given us, —  
to live as God’s chosen agents in this world?

Do we see it as our mission to prove to others, yes even to prove to ourselves

that God is faithful to God’s word, —

that God does save, that God does heal, —

that God does answer prayer, that God does protect?

Years ago before the Academy Awards show, —

a show in which many winners were in the habit of thanking God

when they won an Oscar

as if the win was confirmation that God was faithful, —

*Billy Bob Thornton* was asked if he would thank God if he won.

“No,” Thornton said.

“God has got better things to worry about than my Oscar.

God isn’t here to help me get Oscars. God is here to be obeyed.”<sup>2</sup>

“If you are the Son of God — God’s special agent in this world — jump!

Prove God is God. Prove God is trustworthy.”

So the devil tempts Jesus.

But then *whose prerogative is it to prove God’s faithfulness?*

Jesus refuses to take that role.

Instead, again he responds to the devil

with the teaching of God written in scripture, —

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

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Finally, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world.

“All of these are yours, if only you bow down and worship me,” —

the devil says.

<sup>2</sup> From Pulpit Resource, January, February, March, 1999, p. 34.

And indeed, as Psalm 2 makes clear, and as Jesus surely knew,—  
the Son of God is the one who comes to *rule for God*.  
And that psalm declares God will give to that Son  
all the nations as his heritage, — all of them as his possession.  
It is the destiny of the Son of God to rule over all the kingdoms of the earth, —  
to make wars to cease, to break the yoke of the oppressor.  
And the vision of John of Patmos of the world when it finally reaches God’s goal  
declares, —

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord  
and of his Messiah, —  
and he will reign forever and ever.”<sup>3</sup>

But as we read on in the story we discover that the path  
God has laid out for Jesus to walk toward being the one who rules over all  
is the *path of suffering love*, the path of *pouring out life*, —  
the path that leads to being *nailed up on a cross*.

Here the devil offers another way, —  
a short cut, —

a way to the goal without the pain, without the long slog, —  
without the suffering, without the dying.

Just *bow down, compromise, let the end justify the means*, says the devil.

And how often as we seek to live into the baptismal skin  
of being God’s claimed and treasured servants  
do we hear the lure of the short cut, the compromise to reach the goal?

In the calling to seek peace, —

is there a lure to bow down and serve violence and war?

In the calling to achieve economic well-being for all, —

is there a lure to bow down and serve greed so that the rich get richer  
so more money might trickle down?

In the calling to be God’s agents of reconciliation

in the world, or even in the church or our own families, —  
is there a lure to bow down and serve oppression  
by silencing troublesome persons?

Yet, who has the responsibility to set the path

that leads to the accomplishment of God’s purposes?

Listening again only to the teaching of God, Jesus finally shouts, —

“Away with you, Satan! for it is written, —  
‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”

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There in the wilderness

as he earnestly sought to discern

how to live in the skin of being the Son of God, —

over and over again the urge, stirred up by that devil, —

welled up in Jesus to *take over*, —

*take over for God*.

The urge was great

to take over and set God’s agenda —

to make that agenda manageable, —

to set its priorities according to Jesus’ own hungers.

The urge was great

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 11:15

to take over and prove God is God.  
The urge was great  
to take over and work out a better, easier way  
to reach God's goals.

The urge was there  
to *usurp God's place*  
rather than *to live in the human skin*  
God had given Jesus to live in.

But Jesus, trusting only the word of God, —  
“did not regard quality with God as something to be grasped.”  
Instead being born in human likeness he lived in his human skin  
and remained obedient even to the point of death.<sup>4</sup>

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We baptized ones, the called out ones, claimed, treasured, —  
and commissioned to be Christ's body in this world, —  
continue to grasp and succumb to the temptation  
that we *know better than God*.

We do that just as Jesus' disciples did that.  
For remember Peter.

When Jesus declared that the Son of Man must suffer and be killed, —  
Peter boldly rebuked Jesus.  
“God forbid it, Lord! This must not happen to you.”  
And Jesus shouted back, “Get behind me, Satan!”<sup>5</sup>

But Jesus, who lived in the skin he had been given, lived in it fully  
allowing God to be God  
when all authority is placed in his hands  
as God raised him up out of that crucified death, —  
still turns to Peter and to us and says, “Go . . . make disciples of all nations . . .  
teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”<sup>6</sup>  
He still trusts us to live in the skin we have been given, —  
to live as his servant people, to obey, and to allow him, —  
with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, — to be God  
rather than taking over ourselves.

He still calls us and trusts us, —  
which means these temptations will still well up within us.

Fight them.

Resist them.

But know, as was true with Jesus, —  
*angels* will come and minister to you.

God will never, ever abandon you  
even while you are in that wilderness  
seeking to live into your calling, the skin God has given you.

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Pete Peery, First Presbyterian Church — Asheville  
First Sunday in Lent, 10 February 2008

<sup>4</sup> See Philipppians 2:6-8

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 23:16

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:19-20