

## Like God

My Grandfather Eddy *really* liked peanut butter. According to my mother, Granddaddy liked peanut butter so much that he would grab a spoon and eat it right out of the jar.

Well. As they say, the acorn never falls far from the tree. Grandfather Eddy was a Methodist pastor. I am, too. And like Grandfather Eddy, I like peanut butter. A lot! Never mind the jelly. And Elvis, you can hold the bananas—thank you very much. Just peanut butter.

Peanut butter is nutritious. Peanut butter's good for you. That's my rationalization, and I'm sticking to it. Since Grandfather Eddy's day, they've figured out how to make peanut butter with reduced fat. And that's the kind we get. But unfortunately—because they haven't yet figured out how to take out *all* the fat—peanut butter's not so great for the waistline.

A confession: I like peanut butter too much. Now sometimes that peanut butter jar on the pantry shelf starts calling my name. Starts calling me to open it up and have, you know, just a little taste. Of course, it might end up being *more* than just

a taste. Lots of times, I'm able to overcome that temptation. But not always!

Temptation is the subject of the pair of readings that we hear today: One from Matthew's Gospel and the other from Genesis. This older story resonates with familiarity. It's woven into the very fabric of our being. The story unfolds in a verdant garden. In a luxuriant Eden. The first man and the first woman live amid the beauty and abundance of original paradise. In perfect harmony with the good creation. And in perfect harmony with one another and with their Creator. Who has prohibited only one thing: eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the center of the garden.

But in addition to this prohibition, God has given human creatures the gracious gift of free will. Our first parents—like us—have a choice: to obey or to disobey. When they're confronted with forbidden fruit.

What *is* it about forbidden fruit? What makes it so attractive and alluring? What is it about human nature that drives us to desire the *one* thing that's not permitted?

Remember when you were a teenager? If your parents restricted you from hanging out with someone they considered

unsuitable, didn't that person *immediately* become more desirable?

So is it only because the fruit's forbidden that the first woman and man disobey, causing humanity to fall into sin? It seems to me that the answer to this question lies in the crafty, seductive words of the serpent: *When you eat of this fruit, you will be like God.* That's the kicker. That's the greatest temptation Adam and Eve face. That's the one temptation they can't resist. The temptation to be like God.

The problem is that if they are *like* God, they have no *need* for God. And if we decide that *we're* like God, neither do *we* have a need for God. That's what we take away from this first temptation story.

Our second temptation narrative is one that the church, since ancient times, has read on the first Sunday in Lent. Now Lent—not counting Sundays, which are always little Easters—is a season of forty days. Patterned after the time Jesus spent in a barren desert wilderness. After the Jordan baptism, God's Spirit leads Jesus into this time apart. Into this time alone with himself and his thoughts. Into this time of preparation for ministry. This time of preparing to walk a road that winds its way to a cross.

This time of temptation. When the tempter shows up, he's at his beguiling, enticing best. *Hey Jesus! All the empires of this world can be yours. If only you will worship me. And I know how hungry you must be. So turn these stones into bread! And when you get done with that, take a death-defying leap off the Temple's height. You won't get hurt—that is, if you really are the Son of God. Prove it! Be like God.*

The tempter challenges Jesus to work miracles—self-preserving miracles. What the tempter doesn't grasp—what the tempter *can't* grasp—is that the power of God is never self-serving. But persistently protecting and nurturing, continually comforting and healing, eternally reaching out and saving.

You've probably noticed that to each temptation, Jesus responds with Scripture, with words from Deuteronomy. And what's at the heart of Deuteronomy's message? Loving God with all that you are. Loving God with your whole being. *Loving God. Not trying to be like God.*

You and I are surrounded by a culture that seduces with a full range of persuasive voices. Voices that encourage us to try to be like God—to make idols of ourselves. Voices that tempt us to exploit God's good creation and the creatures that inhabit it.

Voices that coax us to strive to be in control, to be self-sufficient and independent. Voices that urge us to embrace the belief that we can stand on our own two feet. That we don't need anyone. That we can do it all ourselves.

My sisters and brothers, it's a lie. The tempters lie. I *can't* do it all by myself. In fact, without God, I can't do much of anything that has real value. My need of God is great. God's ways are higher than my ways. God's thoughts are higher than my thoughts. And God's wisdom is infinitely greater than mine will ever be. If I convince myself that I can manage the universe, God reminds me that that position has already been filled. God is God. And I am not.

But the Scriptures tell us that Jesus is *the exact imprint of God's very being*. The apostle Paul proclaims that *Christ Jesus...though he was in the form of God...was born in human likeness. And...found in human form.*

This fully divine One has come to fulfill a purpose. Has come to be God-with-us. And to be God-with-us, Jesus had to be fully human. Human in every way. He's experienced every hunger and every emotion that you and I experience, this One

who has been *in every respect tempted and tested as we are, yet without sin.*

This Jesus is the One who teaches us to pray that we not be brought to a time of trial. We live in a world of temptations that assault us from every direction. Like the temptations Jesus faced, these temptations are real. You know their names.

These temptations come directly from the powers of this world. Not from God, who *tempts no one*. Paul assures us that *God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing, God will also provide the way out so that you will be able to endure it.*

The way out of the testing is God's Word. Twentieth-century theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer affirms that "In the temptation of Jesus, there really remains nothing except God's Word and promise, no native strength and joy for the fight against wickedness, only God's strength and victory, which holds fast in the Word, and the Word robs Satan of his power. Only by God's Word is the temptation overcome."

All through God's Word in the Old Testament, we hear a continuing litany, repeated again and again: *Who is like you, O Lord? Who is like you, majestic in holiness? Who is like the*

*Lord our God? There is none like you among the gods. O God, no one is like you.*

Yet there are times when you and I are tempted to *try* to be like God. To crave God's power without sharing God's love. To covet God's sovereignty without reflecting God's compassion. And there are times when we are tempted to fall down and worship the false gods idolized by many in this society.

But in the ongoing conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the reign of God, Christ stands with us—strengthening and equipping each of his disciples. For he prevails over the powers of evil! And his ultimate triumph over them—and the temptations they offer—will be complete.

So in this season of Lent, beloved, spend some wilderness time with your Lord. Spend some time in his Word. Ask his Spirit to place your feet on the path he walked these forty days.

These days when Jesus fasted. It's his expectation that we who follow him will fast also. Could Jesus be calling you to fast for a period of hours or days? To fast, not necessarily from food alone, but also from other distractions? And so to be able to listen for the one voice we need most to hear? What if we began

to think of fasting not as penance, not as deprivation, but as retreat? As gift?

Why not set aside—for a time—the noise and the busy-ness of twenty-first century life? Let yourself enter into a time of preparation. A time of contemplation. A time of self-examination. A time of reflection on who and whose you are. A time to be drawn into intimate communion that deepens knowledge and understanding and love of the only One who is like God.

The One who today invites you to meet him at his Table. Today Christ Jesus nourishes you, sustains you, and readies you for the next miles of your journey. Today he offers you the gift of himself. The gift of his grace. And with that amazing grace, the assurance that the Spirit of God, who leads you into wilderness time, will also lead you out—delivered, and freed to live fully and faithfully—worshiping the Lord your God, and serving no other.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.