

I don't know about you all, but the visual that I have in my head of this Satan character is terrifying-looking.

He's definitely male, I am not sure why (sorry men), and he's either black or red, with horns and a tail and maybe wings, and gnarly sharp teeth.

I feel like I would definitely say "no," to anything this character offered me, if for no other reason than for my own safety.

I also envision Scar from the movie The Lion King.

That might seem like a weird association, but he the villainous lion and he tries to tempt the hyenas into pledging allegiance to him, by promising them power and food and land.

But again, Scar is terrifying.

Despite how tempting his offer might be, I'd probably definitely say "no," because my instincts told me to.

But the truth is that real temptations are much more subtle than that.

They don't come from an evil-looking monster or a power-hungry lion.

And they're not usually so overt.

Temptations often come at us in such a way that they slowly wear us down or ask us to make one tiny compromise at a time.

For those of you who have seen the Lord of the Rings movies, there's a perfect example of this.

I hear it went down a little differently in Tolkien's book, but in the movie, we witness a subtle, relentless attack on Frodo Baggins by the character Gollum.

Frodo is trying to carry the Ring of power to Mordor so as to destroy it, but Gollum really wants it.

Bit by bit, innuendo by innuendo, whisper by whisper, Gollum wears Frodo down, poisoning him against the truest friend anyone has ever had, Samwise Gamgee, thus wooing Frodo to Gollum's side.

Seldom is Gollum overt, he doesn't promise Frodo all the riches in the world, he doesn't make bold or obvious moves.

He whittles away at Frodo's determination and seizes on every opportunity to make Samwise look bad in Frodo's eyes until finally Gollum succeeds in turning Frodo against Sam.

Sam is sent packing, leaving Frodo unprotected and now utterly vulnerable to Gollum's full-frontal assault in trying to get the Ring back for himself.

That's usually how temptation works.

Slow. Subtle.

One small, unfaithful decision at a time, and the consequences are usually pretty minor.

But the problem is that they add up.

You mistreat someone once or twice, you blow them off a few times, not a big deal.

But you do that over and over and over again, and eventually you're going to find that someone who was a very close friend who meant a lot to you, is no longer in your life.

Or your family members who you used to be close to, little by little, you notice that they don't reach out to you as much anymore.

Temptation is insidious.

Now, we often think about it as being temptation towards something, like doing something you shouldn't, towards greed or lust or dishonesty.

But Satan tries to tempt Jesus away from something, away from God.

Each temptation seeks to erode and undercut Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God and therefore undermine his identity.

That's what really happens when we give into temptation is that we are moving away from our Christian identity, our calling to follow Christ.

It's a movement away from the best versions of ourselves.

At the Ash Wednesday service, I used the image of a slinky.

We are always in relationship with God, nothing can tear us away from the love of God.

So imagine you're at one end of the slinky and God is at the other.

You're always connected, but sometimes you're closer, and sometimes you're pull further apart.

Well, giving into temptations in our lives pulls us farther from the love of God.

It stretches the slinky just a little bit more.

No matter what temptation it is, they all seek to shift our allegiance, trust and confidence away from God and towards some false substitute that promises greater rewards.

One pastor I really admire named Rev. David Lose called this passage "identity theft."

Satan fails in his attempt to steal Jesus' identity, and that's what temptations are to us as well.

They're attempts to steal us of our identities as Christ-followers, and replace them with people who follow the values of this world, like greed, youth, power, beauty, the list goes on.

This is one of the many reasons why coming to church is so important.

In the face of so many attempted assaults on our identities by everyone from advertisers to employers, we come to church to be reminded of our true identity.

Call it what you like, whether beloved Children of God, Christians, Christ-followers, choose the title that suits your identity.

We come to have that identity renewed so that we can live in the confidence of God's abundance life and share the good news of God's unending love with those around us.

I like to think that coming to church helps to inoculate us against giving into temptations when we're faced with them.

Now, as you may have heard, our worship theme for this Lenten season is Cultivate and Let Go.

Each week, we are going to look at a different story in Jesus' life and discover what he had to cultivate and what he had to let go of, in order to be successful in his ministry.

As we already had our first beautiful meditation led by Karen Ciardi, these provide us a chance to think about what we want to cultivate and what we want to let go of in our own lives as we journey towards Jerusalem.

In this text, Jesus was able to avoid temptation away from God because he cultivated faithfulness and resistance.

He dug deep, relying on his faith in God.

Now, this passage happens at the end of his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness.

So perhaps that experience in isolation, with no food, helped him draw closer to God.

But still, his faith in God was cultivated even more so after he was able to say no to Satan 3 times.

He also cultivated resistance, the courage to say, “no,” to stand firm, to say that he would only worship the Lord his God, and nobody else.

And he let go of his need for power, for control.

I’ll confess, if there’s one thing I am most tempted by, it’s my need for control.

But Jesus said no, I don’t want all the power and glory, that is for God alone, and I am certainly not willing to worship Satan in exchange for it.

Ironically, by resisting Satan, he retained his power.

If he had given into the temptation to have total control over all the kingdoms of the world, we wouldn’t be here today.

He wouldn’t have had the experience of the Cross, nor the Resurrection, because he would have sold himself to Satan.

So, by resisting temporary power and glory, he gave us Christianity, and 2,000 years later, he still has the power.

Each time he refused the devil, Jesus was cultivating his faith in God and his resistance against evil forces, but he was also learning what it really meant to be Jesus of Nazareth, what his true identity was, lest Satan try to steal in from him.

Each time we resist those small, insidious temptations, our values, our commitment to following the way of Jesus is reaffirmed.

Each time we make a decision that is in line with the Gospel message, that might also cost us material or social capital, we're reaffirming our identity in Christ.

They say it takes 21 days to form a habit.

But perhaps it takes 21 temptations presented to us, to cultivate the habit of saying "no."

And in each of those decisions, we too are cultivating faithfulness and resistance, so that hopefully next time we're presented with such a situation, it becomes that much easier for us to draw on our relationship with God to give us the strength to say no.

I said that Jesus was tempted after having been alone with God in the wilderness for 40 days, I imagine they were pretty close at that point.

I wonder if it would have been as easy for him to say no to Satan if he had just finished his ministry in a certain town where maybe he was rejected and disrespected by the residents and ignored by the disciples.

Would it have been as easy for him to resist that power grab?

He might've been more tempted to say yea, I want to control all the kingdoms, I am tired of all these disobedient people that just don't get it.

But he had been on retreat with God, despite the fact that he was fasting and hungry, maybe his faith reservoir was quite deep.

We're going to find ourselves in situations where our patience has been tested, we are at the end of our rope, and the really easy thing to do would be to give into temptation.

That's why it's important for us to say no to all those small, discreet, seemingly harmless temptations that we are faced with.

Each one of them helps us develop that habit of drawing towards God so that when we're at the end of our rope, relying on our faith and making the choice that's aligned with Jesus' message will be easier for us, because it's like a well-exercised muscle.

This Lenten season, when tempting opportunities present themselves, no matter how benign they might seem, I hope you're able to lean into your faith, and make the right choice.

Each time you do this, you'll be cultivating that much more faith in God and resistance against the evil forces of this world. Amen.