

In 1789, the English poet and artist William Blake published an illustrated collection of poems titled *Songs of Innocence*. Five years later, Blake combined those earlier poems and illustrations with new ones. He titled the entire collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

Today's scripture readings, like Blake's collection of poems, also present pictures of these two common and contrasting conditions in human beings: innocence and experience.

We can speak glibly of the innocence of babies and children, but experience becomes a factor in our lives very early. By the time children reach the age of two, they may express their independence with tantrums and saying "No!" in defiance of their parents. Later in adolescence, young people often push back against other authorities. It comes with gaining experience - but it often comes at a price.

This is illustrated in today's First Reading. Adam and Eve have been given everything they need to live in innocent bliss in the Garden of Eden. God prohibits only one activity - eating the fruit of a particular tree. But the serpent tells the first couple eating the forbidden fruit will open their eyes and make them wise like God. Instead of trusting God's words to them, the man and the woman trust the serpent's words and eat. This experience does not produce the desired effect of making them wise. Instead, it causes them to feel shame and the need to cover their bodies with clothing. The first couple couldn't leave well enough alone and accept their God-given identity. They wanted to be like God.

Do you know the story of *The Runaway Bunny*?¹ He had a similar problem, wanting to be something he wasn't, or at least imagining himself to be something he wasn't. "Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, 'I am running away.' 'If you run away,' said his mother, 'I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.' 'If you run after me,' said the little bunny, 'I will become a fish in a trout stream and swim away from you.' 'If you become a fish in a trout stream,' said his mother, 'I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you.'"

The story continues like this with the little bunny imagining all manner of

¹ Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd, *The Runaway Bunny* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1942).

different ways he will disguise himself, and his mother countering with how she nevertheless will find him. Eventually, the would-be runaway bunny surrenders in this little game with his mother. He realizes that no matter where he goes or what he becomes, his mother is not going to give up being part of his life, so he says, “Shucks, I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.”

One time when our daughter, Hannah, was three, Susan took her to the doctor. Susan shared some story about Hannah’s behavior, whereupon the doctor looked at Hannah and said, “Are you willful?” Hannah didn’t answer. At some very rudimentary level, I suspect she understood what the doctor meant because she heard what her mother had said about her. Hannah probably knew she was willful. The doctor’s question didn’t require an answer. It was rhetorical: we’re all willful. Today’s readings give us an opportunity to reflect on our willfulness and to see how it contrasts with the willingness of Jesus to live according to the word of God.

Today’s Gospel begins with this verse: “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Maybe that raises a question for you. Think about it for a moment - the Spirit led Jesus to be tempted? The Spirit, like Jesus, is one of the persons of the Holy Trinity. In other words, the Spirit is God and Jesus is God. So does this verse suggest that God led God to be tempted? It seems unlikely. But Jesus did teach his disciples to pray, “and lead us not into temptation.” In his explanation to this petition in the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther writes: “It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us...”²

“Tempt” and “temptation” are words that are loaded with negative connotations. To tempt someone is to entice them to do something wrong. But the most basic meaning of the Greek word that Matthew uses for Jesus being tempted is to be tested or tried. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*³ translates the verse this way: “Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it.” *The Message* continues using the word “test” throughout this story: “Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: ‘Since you are God’s Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread.’ Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: ‘It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God’s mouth.’”

² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p. 1164.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, translator, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress in association with Alive Communications, Inc., 2002).

Just about all of us know what it is like to be tested. We've had our spelling tested, our math tested, our blood tested, our vision tested, and we've even had our patience tested, sometimes from being tested. We also know what it's like to prepare for tests.

Thinking about temptation as a test for Adam and Eve and for Jesus in today's readings can open up new dimensions in these stories for us. First of all, we know that the motive for testing is not to cause us to fail, but to help us learn. We prepare for tests by studying, practicing, and training.

For college basketball players and coaches, this time of year is a time of major testing. The 32 conferences in Division I of the NCAA conclude their regular season with a tournament. The champions of those tournaments will receive automatic bids to the NCAA tournament. Next Sunday, the entire 68-team field that will be playing in the men's tournament will be announced. One week from tomorrow, the entire 64-team field that will be playing in the NCAA women's tournament will be revealed. Each team's seeding in the tournament is determined by its record - by how it has responded to the testing it has undergone through the whole season. The two champions will be the teams who survive the tournament testing without losing a single game.

Each basketball game during the regular season, during the conference tournaments, and in the post-season tournaments is an opportunity to be tried and tested. As a result of this testing, teams gather important information about their strengths and shortcomings, including the eventual national championship team. In fact, the champion often is the team that is most able to learn from its experience and make appropriate adjustments to its game plan along the way.

In life, the temptations we face also can be thought of as tests. It is unrealistic for us to expect to pass all of them. But whatever the outcome of our testing, we can make adjustments as we go through life the way coaches and athletes do as they play through a sports season.

For Jesus to fulfill his God-given mission of liberating us from sin by going to the cross, he would have to be strong enough to endure tremendous suffering in body, mind, and spirit. The tests Jesus endured in the wilderness could come only to someone who had unique abilities, and who also was aware that he had them.

Here is how *The Message* Bible describes the next temptation of Jesus: "For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, 'Since you are God's Son, jump.' The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: 'He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that

you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone.' Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: 'Don't you dare test the Lord your God.'" So trusting God means that we do not test God's patience, expecting God to rescue us when we do foolish things.

In the third temptation, the Devil offers to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will worship him. Are all the kingdoms of the world the Devil's to give, or is he lying? Either way, Jesus doesn't take the bait. He shoos the Devil off, "Away with you, Satan!" and quotes Deuteronomy again: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

All three of these tests are temptations to willfulness. In passing the Devil's temptations, Jesus gives us a new model: renouncing willfulness to embrace willingness to serve God.

The Runaway Bunny could not be a fish or a circus performer or a bird - all he could be was a rabbit. Day after day, we are called to remember who and whose we are - people like Adam and Eve who run away from God's loving care, but who nevertheless are on their way home to God through Christ.

Martin Luther once expressed it like this: "This life therefore is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal, but it is the right road."⁴

The tests and temptations we experience in life can bring us to a transformed innocence enlightened by the forgiveness and grace we receive in Christ. Even when we mess up and step off the way of following of Jesus, we can return to the right road. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit continues to call and lead us to Jesus as beloved and forgiven children of God!

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 32: Career of the Reformer II* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 24.