

Sometimes God says no.

Since we are God's children, we are prone to chafe at such parental prohibitions.

There are times that we can see the logic of the no, even if we have trouble accepting it: the ten commandments, for instance.

No killing, no stealing, no adultery: these make sense, and protect our own assets as well, but it doesn't stop us from developing "just war theory" and other justifications, loopholes to wiggle ourselves out of certain unpleasant circumstances.

But there are other times when the no seems like nothing more than the beginning of nonsense.

You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but...

Why is that tree even there, we wonder?

Why would God plant temptation right there within reach; isn't that God's fault, not ours?

Why, the children wonder, does Mom even have a cookie jar if I'm not allowed to touch it?

Why have a stove or a fireplace or rat poison in the house if I can't put them in my mouth and explore them, sample them, see what happens?

It must be because she hates me, or wants to make me suffer.

Or maybe she knows I'll have her magic powers if I get to touch them like she does.

The inner serpent is full of conspiratorial ideas, none of them involving protection and love.

None of them involving trust that our parent, our God has our best intentions at heart.

None of them involving asking God directly - we'd rather triangulate, sneak around, try to get away with something, chance the potentially interesting consequences rather than the predictable answer, which would probably only heighten God's suspicion and our frustration.

God would probably say something defensive like "because I said so," because God is capricious and doesn't really have a good answer.

Because God isn't as savvy and smart as we are, and God knows it.

Yeah, that must be it, think the children.

And the fruit does look good.

It is, of course, the good things that tempt us, not the bad things.

We children tend to give up chocolate and alcohol for Lent, not liver and spinach.

(No offense to those of you who have given up liver and spinach.

We know how much you like it and we're all very proud of you.)

We are tempted to idolize precisely the things that most remind us of the goodness of God: our family, our freedom, our meaningful work, our power, our sense of justice, our good name, those persons and possessions and principles we hold most dear.

It is why the tempter waits forty days and lures the famished one with the possibility of bread from his own powerful and immediate hand rather than God's.

It is why the tempter quotes Scripture and sounds pious and speaks truth halfway and offers efficiency and ease, convenience in contrast to a cross...why the tempter makes so much sense in contrast to the maddeningly inscrutable nonsense of no.

But we are God's children, we are baptized and beloved, and so sometimes, God tells us no.

It makes us testy, because we'd rather test God than be tested ourselves.

Lent is, among other its other difficult spiritual blessings, practice in the art of living with no.
That's why we give up things for Lent, why we fast: sometimes God says no, and we have to learn how to deal.

Sometimes as God's children, created in God's image and lured by compelling external voices (not to mention internal ones), we also have to be able to say no.

That is why we renounce so many things before we celebrate a baptism; sometimes we have to say no.

It gives our yes integrity.

But this takes practice, which is why we have Lent.

This season is a kind of spiritual boot camp, if we have the courage to say yes to it, designed to shape us the way that only struggle can.

Lent pushes us into the wilderness, into hunger, into honesty about our limitations, and into direct contact with the voices that lure us away from what God has told us and taught us, even and especially by twisting God's words to soothe our soreness and bless our appetites.

Righteous moralists with a lust for authority get tempted into screaming no with the presumed authority of God.

Justice-minded liberals with a lust for authority get tempted into reactive, limitless license under the half-truthful banner of God's universal embrace.

All of us continue to chafe and to chip away at no, and that is the ancient and current and eternal human issue at the heart of Lent.

Lent leads us through the desolate landscape of no to an amazing intersection where the roles in our relationship with God reverse.

Once, in a lush garden, God said no but we insisted yes.

At the end of the dusty desert of Lent stands what is left of a tree, two wooden planks nailed together, and on it hangs a dying man who is anything but *a delight to the eyes*.

When we get there, our eyes will be opened, and we will see that God is naked.

We will see the God who has come to live among us, to embrace us, to forgive us; we will see the one who is God's yes to us.

And we say no.

So he dies on that cross, the fruit of our tree of death, the result of our judgment.

And we will return to the garden, not to live ourselves, but to bury him.

As proud, defiant children, we tell God an emphatic no.

As is so often the case with children and their parents, this doesn't work.

Easter happens and overrides our loud, petulant no.

Sometimes God says yes.

And we are just going have to learn how to deal.