

### Three Temptations of the Church

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, Yr. A. February 13, 2005. (Text: Matthew 4:1-11)*

The only person who can escape ever being subject to temptation is a person who has no wants or desires whatsoever, no appetites of any kind, and no life goals, dreams or ambitions. Since all of us by nature have desires, hopes, dreams, appetites and ambitions, we're all vulnerable to temptation. Temptation is always an invitation to do what comes naturally.

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is the story of everybody who ever lived. The serpent's invitation to Eve to eat the forbidden fruit is an echo of our natural appetite for what appears beautiful, delicious, and desirable. The serpent himself is an ancient personification of wisdom – human wisdom. And, of course, there's always the inclination in us – literally from birth – to take a shot at anything that some authority figure has forbidden. (Every parent knows the truth of this. Just tell a three year old that she can't go out and play in the puddles, and see how long it takes before she comes in the house all wet!)

In the Biblical sense, temptations are situations where we feel a pull to behave in a way that goes against our prior knowledge of God's order for life. This pull usually happens inside our heads. It's hardly ever a spoken invitation from an obviously shady character, much less the Devil himself.

The thing that often helps temptation succeed... The thing that makes us yield to it... is that temptation can easily look like a brilliant new idea – an insight, a discovery, a solution to a problem. And it might not really be something that obviously violates the will of God. After all, we're quite capable of revising our understanding of the will of God, or – as we like to put it – “reframing our understanding” of the Bible, so as to accommodate the realization of our desires!

In the Gospel story of the temptations of Christ in the wilderness, that's what the Devil was suggesting to Jesus in the first two of the temptations. He wasn't proposing anything obviously evil there, just a couple of things that challenged Jesus to “reframe his understanding” of how to be faithful to the Father's will. The story of the temptations of Christ is not the snapshot of a one-time event in the life of Jesus. It's really a parable of the temptations Jesus had to face all through his life. Let's look at the three temptations one at a time.

Since the conventional wisdom about the Messiah in those days was that he would provide an endless supply of food for Israel, the temptation to turn stones into bread was simply *an invitation to fulfill popular expectations*. (That seems like a reasonable suggestion. Why not give people exactly what they want?)

Jesus' critics kept asking him for a sign. Healing sick people did not impress them; they could explain that away as easily as we can today. They wanted to see something truly unusual, something fantastic — like making the sun move backwards in the sky. The temptation to jump off the top of the Temple was *an invitation to get attention and silence criticism by creating a sensation*. (And why not? It wouldn't have hurt anybody. A little showmanship can be quite effective. According to the Devil's proof text, it was even authorized by the Bible. And it sure would have made those picky Pharisees hush their mouths!)

The Roman Empire was a great political success. People recognized that if you had imperial power – the biggest army and the biggest navy and hordes of flunkies to do your bidding – you could get your way all the time. The temptation to bow down to the Devil and receive all the power in the world was *an invitation to play by the world's rules* —to enforce the will of God with the sword. (Now there's an idea that later caught on big with emperors, kings, popes, the Puritans, and even a few Presidents of the United States.)

But... Jesus was so centered in the will and word of God that he saw through every one of the temptations and recognized the wrong track that each one would have put him on.

Just as each of us face temptations, and Christ himself struggled with temptations, so the church is exposed to temptations too. Unfortunately, the church has regularly yielded to the temptations that have come along. Unlike Jesus our Lord, the church often seems to be so poorly rooted in an understanding of God's word and will that we seize on the Tempter's proposals as great ideas that will help us be more successful. To match the three temptations of Christ in the wilderness, I want to identify three temptations of the church in the postmodern world.

**The first is the temptation to treat worship as a commodity.** This is an invitation to Christians to regard themselves as shoppers, as "consumers of spiritual goods and services." When clergy and other worship planners begin thinking most about how to appeal to the market, we turn worship into the service of human appetites rather than the service of the Lord. —Our clear focus in worship is meant to be on God – on making an offering to please God, not on pleasing ourselves.

I heard Dr. Marva Dawn, a Lutheran theologian and ethicist, once tell about a conversation she had with another woman following a worship service in their church. The other woman had not liked a new hymn that was sung during the service, and after church she had said to Marva, "I didn't like that new song at all. It didn't do a *thing* for me." Dr. Dawn replied, "Oh, I didn't know we were worshiping you. I thought we were worshiping *God!*" —Treating worship as a commodity, as a product for the market, makes worship all about *me*, and not about God.

**The second temptation of the church is to understand spiritual success in material terms.** This is an invitation to practice spiritual secularism, to be focused on institutional goals instead of gospel goals. The church is tempted to fall for the magic of big numbers. There's a terrible temptation for priests and vestries and bishops, too, to look at the numbers (anything we can count or measure)— Sunday attendance, members on the roll, money in the offering plate, dimensions of the church buildings— and equate "big numbers" with success as a church. Marva Dawn, whom I quoted earlier, said that she overheard a revealing slip of the tongue at a clergy luncheon where one pastor, chatting with another, asked, "Well, how many are you worshiping on Sunday these days?" —The mission Christ gave us was to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him, not build an ecclesiastical empire.

**The third temptation of the church is to spend almost all of its energy and resources in self-serving.** This is an invitation to selfishness, to treat the church the way we would a civic club, a voluntary association of like-minded people who have banded together to build an effective community organization. Like the temptation to treat worship as a commodity, the temptation to selfishness and clubbiness makes satisfying our personal appetites and felt needs the main work of the church. It puts us squarely on the throne and leaves God's agenda out of serious consideration.

William Temple, the great archbishop of Canterbury during World War II, said, "The church is the only organization in the world that exists exclusively for the benefit of those who are not its members." Yet in most congregations of every Christian denomination 90% or more of the church's total energy and resources is focused inward, not outward, not on those who are outside the church family. The typical church works hardest at pleasing itself and making its own house more comfortable. —The Great Commandments, however, are to "*Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength*" and to "*Love your neighbor as you love yourself*"...not just "*Love God*" and "*Love yourself*."

It's Lent. This is the time we're given every year for confessing our sins and changing our lives. This is a time for repentance, for choosing a new path. I have to confess to you that, as a priest and pastor, during three decades in the ministry I have personally yielded frequently to all of these "temptations of the church" that I described this morning. I repent! And I beg God's forgiveness. I pray that beginning this Lent (and continuing hereafter) I – and we who are the church – will:

- Make God alone, and not our personal taste, the focus of our worship.
- Identify success as a church with faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ, and not with "bigness" or wealth. And,
- Remember that our mission is not to take care of ourselves, but to serve the world our Savior died to save.