

Jesus understands us.

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
1st Sunday in Lent, Year A. February 10, 2008. (Text: Matthew 4:1-11)*

Every person alive craves to be *understood*. When we feel understood, we feel secure; we feel safe. We particularly want to be understood at times when we've done something that other people might see as out of bounds, or even against the law. That's why someone whose car has been stopped by a state trooper, will often immediately roll down the window and start explaining just why he was driving too fast. "Officer, I guess I must have been speeding, but my speedometer doesn't work! It started acting crazy yesterday, and I can't get it fixed until day after tomorrow. —You're not going to give me a ticket are you?"

Who understands you the best? ...Your spouse? ...Your children? Most of all, we want *God* to understand us. We believe that Jesus understands us perfectly because he went through everything *we* go through. He experienced temptations of the kind that aren't limited by history or culture, but have been common to people in every age. Jesus confronted *more* temptations in his life than just the three we hear about. —But we're going to look at these well-known three because I think we'll see elements in each that are not unique to Jesus. They apply to us, too.

Before we talk about the three temptations, though, we need to recognize that God sent his Son Jesus into the world to blaze a trail for us to follow. That's a simple way of describing the ministry of Jesus. He has gone ahead of us to create a path we can follow to find our way home to God. It's essential for us to learn from Jesus' face-off with Satan in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, because when anybody gets serious about following Jesus, we're going to encounter just what he did: a forced choice between good and evil in circumstances where the real *evil* appears totally harmless – even logical and desirable (as in the first temptation) – while the *good* looks uninteresting or even repugnant.

After he had been baptized, the Spirit of God led Jesus into the Judean desert, where he fasted for a very long time – forty days. Fasting, then and now, is a discipline meant to direct the fasting person's attention to the truth that we human beings are body *and* spirit, "spiritual animals" you might say, who need *intangible* nourishment for the spirit just as much as we need physical food for the body. In his severe hunger, the Tempter came to Jesus and said, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." — Why is there a problem here? Jesus had been fasting forty days. Wasn't that enough? There's nothing wrong with eating food when you're hungry, is there?

No. Food is good, not bad. But there's something else going on here, something hidden by the obvious rightness of a hungry person being permitted to eat: there's a temptation to ignore God's will. The Son of God had been sent into the world to share our human condition – in every way – in order to guide us to the Father. No personal privileges. No special treatment. He's fully human. But in this episode we see Jesus tempted to use his special relationship with God as a kind of magic wand to supply his merely private needs: to assuage his physical hunger. He was tempted to sidestep the normal discomforts of bodily human life – which was one of the conditions his Father had set for him. But since Jesus' mission from God was to blaze a trail that *we* could follow, he had to do it with all of *our* mortal limitations in place. He had to be our brother, share our life. And we *can't* turn stones into bread.

We're often enticed to ignore God's will, but the greatest similarity between Jesus' first temptation and ours is this: to focus whatever powers we have at *our* disposal on simply satisfying our appetite for the desirable *things* of this world, to settle for the comfort they can give us, rather than endure the *dis*-comfort and *dis*-ease that always go along with waiting (and waiting and waiting) for God to fill the hollow places in our soul. Jesus replied to Satan with the words of Moses, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." The temptation for people of every age has been "to live by bread alone."

Because Jesus used Scripture to respond to Satan's first temptation, the Tempter used the Bible to launch the second. He took Jesus to the highest point of the Temple and said, "If you're the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for the Scripture says, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" We could re-phrase the temptation this way, "So, you think you're 'the Son of God,' do you? How do you *know*? Can you *prove* it? Jump off the Temple! If you're God's Son he'll surely send angels to catch you, since he promised he would—right in the same Bible where it says people can live on God's words just as well they can on bread."

Again Jesus is tempted to bypass his Father's plan, to violate the terms of his mission to lead humanity home to God while sharing all human limitations. But this second temptation is also much like one that comes to every believer, since we always must deal with doubt: "Maybe I'm deluded. Maybe the atheists are right, and there is no God. How can I *know* for sure?"

The Tempter asked Jesus, "How do you *know* you're the Son of God? Can you prove it?" And he asks us, "How do you *know* God loves you? How do you *know* God answers prayers? Here's a test that should settle the question. You're a diabetic (...or you have cancer, or have had a stroke, or some other health issue), so just very sincerely ask God to heal you. If you're healed, then God is real, beyond doubt. If you're not healed, well then you've been deceived about God. —Or maybe God is real but he doesn't care that much about *you*." Jesus answered Satan by saying, "The Scripture says, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" We might not know the Bible well enough to give that answer, but we should know enough to give this one: "God calls us to live by faith, and the opposite of faith is not doubt, but *certainty*." Requiring God to prove himself by healing me puts *me* in charge of the conditions under which I encounter the reality of God. That makes God a means to an end dictated by *me*! But God will not let himself become my "magic tool." He requires me to live this life of faith without any earthly security, and Jesus shows me that I can grow spiritually through facing the reality of suffering. Christ did not promise to deliver us from every pain, but he DID promise *to be with us* in everything we suffer. The experience of his presence is a joy, a good greater than any other.

With the third temptation Satan stops trying to sow doubt in Jesus, and tries instead to persuade him that he could accomplish his life's goals much more effectively by using the power of what you and I might call "the Dark Side." He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and says, "If you will just worship *me*, I will give you all this." This temptation must have presented itself to Jesus again and again! Jesus was a naturally charismatic man. He could have created a revolutionary movement and played a political power game. He could have manipulated Herod, or Pilate, or the Sanhedrin. He could have been a Machiavellian realist and had "real" power – soldiers and secret police. He could have *made* people behave!

Seduction like this "from the Dark Side" comes even to well-meaning Christian parents, pastors, and politicians. And it has come repeatedly to the Church. The medieval papacy yielded to the temptation to wield political power, to compel people to practice what the Church regarded as "the only way." The Religious Right in America these days seems to be suffering from a similar temptation. Satan's rule is "always maximize your power," use all the power you have to get your way, no matter how you apply it. You're justified if what you're doing is God's work.

Jesus' third answer to the Tempter was again from the Bible and it's simple: "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Jesus was tempted to value only the "ends" and disregard the "means" used to attain them. We're tempted in precisely the same way. *But for Christ and for us, the highest goal and ultimate good is GOD alone.* And we reach God by following the path that Jesus created for us by his life, death, and resurrection – a path which entails the very opposite of maximizing our power. He says, "If any of you want to become my followers, then deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it."