

LENT 1, Mar. 5, 2017, Year A

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down..." (from Matthew 4:1-11)

- Here is an image worthy of Lenten reflection: James Tissot's portrayal of *Jesus' Second Temptation*. Hovering over the Jerusalem Temple, we see starkly contrasting figures ~ the *bodiless* tempter with an *anger-filled* face; and the *serenely embodied* Jesus, whose focus is *within*. This is *not* the *only* moment in which his evident *self-possession* is challenged.
- "*If you are the Son of God...*" Why would those words have any power over Jesus? Perhaps it's because *they echo something said* earlier in the Gospel. For we heard virtually the same words at the Baptism of Jesus.¹ "Just as he came up from the water... a voice *from heaven* said, '*This is my Son, the beloved...*'" The voice from heaven declared that *this man, born to a village carpenter, was in fact God's own Son*. We *need not* have grown up in modern times to consider the claim improbable. Many of Jesus' own contemporaries surely considered the statement *far-fetched*, and even *blasphemous*. *Jesus, himself, may have wondered at this*. He probably had had strong youthful *premonitions*, that God had marked him for a special vocation. *But, it's unlikely he would have imagined there was something unique about his personal being, rather than more simply a difference in the kind of activity to which he was being called*. And so, *as* he came up from the Jordan waters and heard those *now-familiar* words, he may have wondered what was *really* being said.
- In the first three Gospels, Jesus' *wilderness testing* directly follows his Baptismal experience of *God's disclosure* and verbal *revelation*. The wilderness became a *proving-ground* for his sense of vocation. *What does it mean to be marked out by God for a special calling?* The significance of this question is *not limited* to Jesus. For *every one of us*, who follows his path through the waters of Baptism, hears the same message—*if not from heaven, then—through the voice of the Church*. 'You... you... *you are my sons and my daughters, my beloved. In you I am well-pleased!*' And yet, *through the following years, a voice wells up within us, asking—perhaps even mockingly—how can this be? ... You (?)!* — born in Grand Rapids or Kalamazoo, or on a farm north of Rockford! *You (?), as God's beloved son or daughter, with a special vocation to witness* to what God is up

to? For *we have every reason to dismiss these voices*, prudently assuring ourselves, that '*most of us weren't cut-out to be missionaries!*' (pause)

- Jesus, *alone* in the desert... It must have felt like "*now or never!*" A childhood and young adult life shaped by a genuine piety, and full of *Spirit-shaped intuitions*. And *then*, in the wilderness, *all is tested*. And *not* for the last time!
- The voice in the wilderness probably said *other things* to him: "*Hello, my friend. Yes, you recognize my voice. I come in peace. Indeed, I'm probably the only one who believes you and those strange words from the sky. So, you see, I'm on your side!*" Let's suppose it's *all* true. In fact, *let's prove it! If you're the Son of God*, you'll *change the world* sooner than you think. *Do yourself a favor* ~ make these stones into bread-rolls. Then, you won't be hungry and you'll soon become very popular! Or, *even better*, as I lift you to the top of the Temple, see how *great* everything looks. *Jump!* Everyone *loves* a wonder-worker. Besides, if you are God's beloved, *what can go wrong?*"
- In our Gospel, we hear *three* successive variations of this testing. And three times Jesus responds with a *calm* and *non-anxious* statement of faith. Matthew then says that "the devil *left* [Jesus]..." Luke is more *revealing* at this point. He tells us that the devil "departed from [Jesus] *until an opportune time*."²
- *Why is this significant?* Because, in the sweep of the whole-Gospel narrative, Jesus is *again and again* confronted by the same challenge and testing, occasionally in more subtle ways. Though some people, *including his followers*, may be unsure of his identity, *the demons shout out* in alarm, "*What have you to do with us, Son of God?*" ~> Well, *if it was you or me*, who would *we trust?* People that we see and touch, *or*, the voices of *possibly imaginary* demons?
- Later, *after* seeing Jesus walking on the water and calming a storm, the frightened disciples tell him, "truly, *you are the Son of God*." Compared to the voices of the demons, this may have been more gratifying to hear. But *could he really* trust the disciples *more* than he could a *fallen angel*? *After all*, they were

slow on the uptake, and like most other people, they were vulnerable to illusion.

- The *veiled voice of the tempter returns* when the great high priest questions Jesus. With the power to condemn him for blasphemy, the priest says, "I put you under oath... *tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.*"³ How tempting it must have been for Jesus, to say something like, '*this is all a mistake... it's all a misunderstanding!*' After all, he came proclaiming and commending God's *kingdom*, and *not himself*. Nevertheless, he goes silently to the cross, where he is mocked by other voices who speak the same words: "If you *are* the *Son of God*, come down from the cross!"⁴
- It's only *after* his suffering and death, that he's vindicated by *indifferent* witnesses, to whom his mission has *also* been directed. After his crucifixion, when the soldiers had witnessed his death, they said, "Truly, this man was *God's Son!*"⁵
- So, all told, *ten times* in Matthew's Gospel we find Jesus confronted with the title, '*Son of God,*' either *stated* or *implied*.⁶ In *five* of them, his identity is piously confessed and affirmed; and in *five*, his identity is challenged and tested. But Matthew surely wants us to notice the *first and the last*. In both, his identity is *positively* affirmed. Yet, in between, he is *challenged, but is not swayed* by testing.
- In light of this, let's return to *Tissot's image of the self-possessed Jesus*, and assume it *faithfully* portrays his character. A significant part of *Jesus' self-possession* stems from the fact that he is *not captive to others, and not captive to possessions*. *Self-possession* is focussed *within*; possession by things and by other people happens when we are *distracted* by what is around us. And so, *self-possession* is an *antidote* to being possessed by our possessions. For *self-possession* makes possible *self-giving*. This is why we distinguish *self-possession* from *self-absorption* and *self-orientation*. This is because *self-possession* and *self-giving* are *natural and spiritual corollaries*. In his vocation, and especially in his Passion and Death, *Jesus exemplified self-giving*.

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- Lent gives us an opportunity to grow into self-possession, and into self-giving. For, we won't grow much spiritually by giving things up during Lent, without also becoming more active in giving things away. Why give-up, without also giving away? Otherwise, our giving-up can become *self-serving* or *self-affirming*, rather than *self-effacing* and *self-giving*.
- We find in Jesus' temptation a *parallel challenge* to what we ourselves *experience*. Though *in every respect* he was tested as we are, he did not sin.⁷ Yet, when we are tested, we're inclined to hold on to what we have, and know, rather than be open to that toward which our vocation leads us. If Jesus had succumbed to his temptation, he *would* have followed the path of *self-preservation*, rather than of *self-possession*. He *would* have modeled *self-keeping*, rather than *self-giving*. But he did not. And, following his example, during this Lent, we can discover how much we grow by giving.



James Tissot, *Jesus 2nd Temptation*

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘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.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Notes:

¹ Commemorated on the feast day which always occurs on the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

² Compare Matthew 4:1-11 with Luke 4:1-13 (emphasis added to the Luke quote).

³ See Matthew 26:63, for this quote and the following observation. Here we see a profound difference between the first three (or Synoptic) Gospels, and John, the fourth Gospel where, unlike the first three, Jesus refers to himself as being one with the Father (see John 10:30).

⁴ See Matthew 27:40.

⁵ Matthew 27:54

⁶ See Matthew 3:16-17; 4:3; 4:6; 4:8-9; 8:29; 14:33; 16:16; 26:63; 27:40; 27:54. [See the additional handout, “[Temptation and Affirmation ~ ‘the Son of God’ in Matthew](#),” for further insight]

⁷ See Hebrews 4:15.