

- On [this first Sunday in Lent every year](#), we hear about the 'Temptation of Jesus.' [Matthew, Mark and Luke present varying descriptions of this prelude to Jesus' ministry, while John does not.](#)¹ That we have *differing descriptions* of [this validation of Jesus' vocation](#) should make us curious about *why* it is so. *And if* our wondering about this leads us to compare the first three Gospels, [we will notice something further](#). Mark *merely tells us* that Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan." *That's it ~ no description of what his temptations involved.* While the first and third Gospels *do* describe the *same* three temptations, Matthew and Luke present them in a *different* order. *Noticing this* about our Gospel today may be important, especially for our appreciation of what Luke has to teach us.
- [James Tissot's paintings of the three temptations follow Luke's way of presenting them.](#)² *First* Jesus is tempted to turn a stone into a loaf of [bread](#). *Then* he is tempted to assume [power and authority](#) over all the kingdoms of the world. And, *third*, he is tempted to [test God](#) by leaping off the pinnacle of the Temple. [Matthew, by contrast, puts testing God second.](#)³ He *then* places *third* the temptation about the kingdoms of the world, which happens [on a mountain](#). This fits well with Matthew's presentation of Jesus' *later* great sermon as occurring on a mountain. And it further fits with how Matthew ends his Gospel where Jesus commissions his disciples on a mountain. [Luke, by placing the temptation to test God at the Temple third,](#) matches how structures his understating of Jesus. For he begins his Gospel with Zechariah [in the Temple](#), and ends his Gospel with the disciples worshipping [in the temple](#) after Jesus' ascension. Jesus' temptation plays a pivotal role in *both* Matthew and Luke, but in observably *differing* ways.
- By looking closely at James Tissot's three *Temptation* paintings we can gain a greater sensitivity to what Luke tells us, or wants us to notice. [Observe how Tissot portrays Jesus in the cave, looking over his shoulder at the devil. To be tempted is to notice the allure of something that may be good or bad.](#)

Or it may be to notice something morally *neutral* that might be pursued in a *bad* way. This is where we find temptation most difficult. Features of the world attract our attention. We then experience the allure of what we encounter, which at first may be positive. Giving our attention to attractive aspects of the world is *not yet* temptation. But when our perception of the allure that we encounter shifts toward a desire *to appropriate* what we notice, and *have it for our own purposes*, we are being tempted. So, to be caught or confused by the alluring power of what grabs our attention is *not in itself* sin. *But when we consent to its appeal, and begin to make choices and to act on its pull, our temptation become an occasion of sin.*

- Here we can turn to *the nature of the things* with which the devil tempts Jesus, things common to both Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the temptations. The devil tempts Jesus with *bread*. He tempts him with *authority and glory* in the world's kingdoms. And he tempts him to put to the test *God's promise of protection*. Yet, *bread, authority in human community, and reliance on God's Providence, are in themselves good things*. It is only in wanting these things *for the wrong reasons, or in desiring them differently* from how God would have us appreciate them, that we move into sin.
- These observations remind us that, *in Jesus' temptations, we perceive his humanity as well as his divinity*. That he was tempted reveals his *humanity*. That he did not sin when he was tempted marks his *divinity*. For, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, he was tempted in every way that we are, yet *he did not sin*.⁴
- I find Tissot's portrayal of Jesus' posture in each of these paintings especially *evocative*. In each, *he faces away from the tempter, even if he looks at* what the devil is holding, or at what the devil points him towards seeing. And Tissot's *second and third paintings of the temptations capture a subtle but important feature of Luke's presentation of them*. Luke tells us

that Jesus was *full of the Holy Spirit*, and *led by the Holy Spirit*, in the wilderness. And Luke describes Jesus in this manner *before* the devil leads him up to a high place, or takes him to Jerusalem. And so, Tissot is faithful to Luke when he portrays Jesus as *inwardly at peace, self-possessed and prayerful during the second and third temptations*. Luke's description of Jesus also suggests that *he did not fear his temptation* by the devil. So, after our Baptism into his death and resurrection, and after receiving the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit, *why should we ever fear temptation?* Even when we succumb to it! *For we can always repent and return to the Lord.*

- Luke's description of Jesus as *full of the Spirit*, and Tissot's image of the *self-possessed Jesus*, can provide us with a further insight. A significant part of what I have called 'Jesus' self-possession' stems from the fact that he is not captive to others, and not captive to material 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. It's because *self-possession and self-giving are natural and spiritual corollaries.*
- This is why Jesus' temptations are so revealing about his acceptance of his vocation. For his temptations are all about how *he has given himself over to God's purposes for him*, rather than to what he might *take or receive for himself*. In *accepting his vocation to serve both God and other people*, especially in his Passion and death, *Jesus exemplified self-giving.*
- Lent gives us an opportunity to grow into self-possession, and into self-giving. For, we won't grow much spiritually *only by giving things up* during Lent, if we don't also become more active in giving things *away*. *Why give-*

LENT 1, Mar. 10, 2019, Year C

*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. Yet, *when we are tested*, we're inclined to *hold on to what we have and know*, rather than be open ~ 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*. When we give away things we ultimately *cannot keep*, we open ourselves more to *the gift we want to have* eternally.



James Tissot, *Jesus Tempted in the Wilderness; Jesus Taken Up Into a High Mountain; Jesus Carried Up to a Pinnacle of the*



Luke 4:1-13

After his baptism, **Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit**, returned from the Jordan and **was led by the Spirit** in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then **the devil led him up** and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"

Then **the devil took him** to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Notes:

¹ Compare Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13.

² Luke 4:1-13.

³ See Matthew 4:1-11.

⁴ See Hebrews 4:15.