

Tom James
February 10, 2008
1st Sunday of Lent
Matthew 4.1-11
“The God Movement”

I don't know if you've noticed it, but there's a movement afoot in this country. There is something in the air. Things are all stirred up. A lot of money is changing hands. There are mass meetings in the daytime and whispered conversations after hours. Expectations are high. Confidence is surging. Talking points are flying, and the electorate is positively...well, electrified.

Sound like I'm talking politics? Actually, I'm talking about *religion*. And it's not just in this country that exciting things are going on, as fiercely religious as we are. Worldwide, there is a project that is commanding more and more of our attention, and eliciting more and more of our collective effort. I call it “the God Project.”

Part of the energy behind this great, global project is the realization that the old God has kind of had his day. People are tired of the old God. People have sort of had it with the God who has lots to say about how we ought to live but never seems to show up when we find ourselves in a scrape. We remember that on 9/11 no one seemed to know quite where God was—somewhere in the sky, I guess, safely above the fray. And after Katrina it seemed like it took forever for God to show up. So now we're pretty much done. We have a serious case of “God-fatigue.”

But there is a rather unexpectedly rich slate of exciting new candidates. People are flocking to them, building them up, forming bases around them. First, we have God the need-meeter. This God can turn stones into bread, make us happy when we are feeling blue, heal us when we are sick, get us a better job when we don't like our boss, and on occasion deliver the choice parking space in a crowded mall lot. This God seems to offer all the things the old one did not—back scratches instead of kicks in the backside, positive feelings instead of conviction, affirmation instead of challenge. This need-meeting God really gets the bucks flowing, too, as you might imagine. People are ready to pay for the important services this God renders. And the best part is that you don't have to trade in your old religion to elect this new God. We talk easily and comfortably about this God in our churches. We can even connect him with Scripture and tradition very readily—it's just as easy as learning to use religion to suit our own personal needs. And we're pretty good at that! We've got lots of practice.

And next we have God the security-giver. This is where a lot of the energy comes from, actually. The security-giving God is a great campaigner, able to appeal to our deepest fears, and then, at just the right moment, to offer faith as a way to side-step our worries rather than having to deal with them head-on. God the security-giver can keep us from dashing our feet on the stones of misfortune, protect us from people we don't understand or want to, assure us that our needs are higher on the priority list than other peoples' needs. This God deflects risk away from us and never asks us to face the uncertainty of change. And the security-giver can comfortably inhabit the pulpit and the pew just about as well as the need-meeter. We like to cling to Rocks of Ages and dwell within Mighty Fortresses, and we've learned over many generations to equate stability and piety.

Probably, the candidate we feel most ambiguous about is a third one, God the power source. Secretly, I think most of us want at some level to identify God with power. Viscerally, power seems like the obvious focus for our worship, and I don't even need to say much about what this God offers: world domination is only the most extravagant example. And yet, our moral sense intervenes here, and we are quick to say in public at least that we prefer one of the other candidates. An interesting detail here is that God the power source seems to fare much better behind the private curtain of the voting booth than at public caucuses.

Actually, as I'm sure you'll agree, I'm being a little mischievous here. In truth, these candidates for divinity in our day are not all that new. Jesus knew about all of them, even though he never supported any of them. In fact, as we see in this morning's gospel passage, Jesus is a bit of a religious maverick, preferring the God who speaks to any of the Gods that everyone is speaking about. Jesus elects the God who calls people into the desert to fast and pray rather than the God who offers food service. Jesus chooses the God who calls him to face risk rather than the God who would keep him safe from it. Jesus answers the call of God to service rather than the divine or demonic urge to dominate. In the midst of the religious clamoring of our day, Jesus seems still to be campaigning for a God who is badly out of step with the whole God project.

Maybe what Jesus is, actually, is the campaign manager for a subtle, persistent counter-movement, a kind of religiously subversive project that cuts against the grain not only of our own time but of the human heart itself. There is little doubt that we human beings churn out gods like a factory that never runs out of fuel or raw materials. We produce an array of divinities out of the endless stream of religious chatter. Meanwhile, perhaps, a God is whispering to us. Come, find your life by risking it. Come, be filled by allowing yourself to become empty. Come, experience for yourself the power that is perfected in powerlessness. Could it be?