

First Sunday in Lent

L'CHAIM-TO LIFE

Luke 4:1-13

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

4:1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where 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. 3The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" 5Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6And 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. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 9Then 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, 10for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 12Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

DIAGNOSIS: Craving What Belongs to God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Bread, Etc.*

Jesus, despite being “full of the Holy Spirit” (v. 1), was “tempted by the devil” (v. 2); nonetheless his temptations were not successful and he soon “departed” (v. 13). So what? Jesus was, after all, the “Son of God” (vv. 3, 9). Was Jesus able to resist the devil because he was the Son of God, or because his temptations were all too human and therefore all too easy to resist? Were Jesus’ temptations real and meaningful, or a sham and of no consequence? Since we already know that Jesus died in our place, “for us,” we suspect that Jesus’ success against the devil was his before it became ours, and that he resisted on our behalf rather than on his own. Jesus’ temptations must therefore be our temptations (that is, real for us) before they are his (that is, real for him), and his success must be one that we ourselves could not achieve. For Jesus’ temptations to be real and meaningful, therefore, he must be as human as anyone else (even though he is also the Son of God), not only a person but every person. This is our starting point. To be “tempted” is to be offered, at high price, what we most want for ourselves at the time. For most of the world, daily “bread” (v. 3) is a sufficient temptation. Consider that bread is whatever provides continuity for life. Many, for example, will steal or even kill for it. But, having life, we do not stop at wanting bread; we want to have it all (v. 6). And, inexorably, we want immortality (v. 9). These are the temptations of humanity in a nutshell. We want what is not “ours” to begin with; for everything already belongs to God. Consequently we are never content with what we “have” (been given); for they are only ours in trust. More importantly, the things we want are really expressions or extensions of ourselves. Whatever our temptations might be, they are inseparable from our very existence. What we resist, therefore, is our created givenness, that is, our creatureliness, that we ourselves are “given” in trust.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Temptation Within*

We need to change gears now and view the Temptations of Christ from within. Since what we resist is ourselves-as-creatures-of-God, the voice of our resistance to our givenness is demonic or devil-ish, that is, anti-christ. The voice of the devil is our own voice tempting us to exist apart from our given-creatureliness. We tempt ourselves at every moment of “our” lives, to extend ourselves in time and space securely and forever. Because we do not trust in our Creator (the Guarantor of our givenness), either to sustain us or to make us a blessing for others, the “we” we arrogantly become is demonic, devil-ish, anti-christ.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Living Dead*

As if that weren’t bad enough, now we are abandoned to our loneliness before God, which is the flip side of our “departing” (v. 13) from Jesus-the-Christ. We are locked into a never-ending cycle of departing and returning: at each moment departing (in our arrogance) from our given-creatureliness, and returning again (in that very givenness which cannot be lost) to confront our creatureliness. Living thus under the continuous judgment of our Creator, on behalf of Whom “it is written” (vv. 4, 8, 12), we have become the living dead. No need to wait until the end to hear it though. We already live it! But the devil’s days are numbered (by the devil’s Creator). Our final deaths will merely confirm this judgment.

PROGNOSIS: Worshipping God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God’s Son*

We are cheered by Jesus’ successful resistance to the devil, because we cannot. But Jesus does, and he does so on our behalf; that is, in godly freedom, not merely because he embodies and enacts true given-creatureliness. This life of freedom, oriented

towards God both in worship (v. 8) and in honor (v. 12), is what makes him, in relation to us as well as to God the Father, the Son of God. In a freedom only possible by the Holy Spirit (v. 1), Jesus is truly alive! By living before God without wanting more than he is given, Jesus exudes “eternal life” and embraces the world as God’s world. The demonstrative moment, summarizing all other moments to a “mathematical point” (Luther), is Jesus’ crucifixion. In Jesus’ own death, all other deaths are judged and all other given-lives are reconciled to God. For us, this can only mean the “forgiveness of sin.” That is to say, God offers us a given-creatureliness that is simultaneously a dying (of our old self, with Christ) and a rising (to a new self, with Christ) with a freedom to live (as Christ lives) on the basis of God’s generosity, thereby refusing all temptations to an independent life. Apart from Christ, we are nothing.

[Note to theologians: Please do not get befogged by christological correctness. I am simply trying to understand the Temptation soteriologically.]

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *In God We Trust*
We change gears once again, and now view ourselves, that is, our given-creatureliness, from the perspective of the Holy Spirit. (If we were to view ourselves from our own perspective, we would be back to Step 2). If “one does not live by bread alone” (v. 4), who sustains us? Luke’s unstated continuation is made explicit in Matthew who adds, from Deuteronomy 8:3 concerning the manna, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Therefore “worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (v. 8). Anything less than absolute trust in God’s creative word, which is essentially a promise of life, puts God “to the test” (v. 12). Absolute trust, however, means the death of us, that is, the death of the “we” that seeks to wrest our own life from God’s creation. Happily-in Christ, we are able to die and to find in him, for the first time, authentic given-

creatureliness. It is not too hyperbolic to say that we “feed” on Christ in order to live in all honesty before God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *To Life!*

What is at issue here is Life itself. Gandhi once said that, for God to be relevant today, God must appear in the form of bread. Maybe so, maybe so. When Jesus was faced with a hungry crowd, and his disciples urged him to send them away to fend for themselves, he said to his disciples, “You give them something to eat” (Mt. 14:16); only when they were unable did Jesus feed them -superabundantly! (But if we were to remain at this level of need, we would find ourselves back at Step 1, continually craving the security of what is already given). Even if bread and everything else in the world were in abundance for everyone, death would still cast its shadow. “One does not live by bread alone” (v. 4), but by the Word of God (Matt. 4:4). What is offered in Jesus is God himself, the Giver of Life. Bread, that is, Life itself (and everything else that we need), is not a thing to be taken but a gift to be received. Life is given in trust. For what purpose then is this given-life, but to love one another, to expend life on behalf of others? L’chaim! To-Life!