

First Sunday in Lent

IDENTITY CHECK

Matthew 4:1-11

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 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.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

DIAGNOSIS: "The Godsons? Oh Really?"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Putting on Airs*
Jesus didn't. Garth and Greta do, relentlessly. Garth and Greta?

Surname Godson. Think John and Jane Doe blessed or beset with inner notions of a filial connection to God that either is or ought to be. Old Eve and Adam—that names them too. Assume they're baptized, though maybe they're not. In either case they keep flailing their lives away on the quintessential sinner's project of establishing their bona fides as members of the Godson clan. Type A Greta takes the route of superwoman can-do-ness. Stones to bread (v. 3)? Nah, her thing is blood from stone. Watch how she wrings 23 hours of productivity from her 16 hour working day, a dime's worth of buying power from every nickel she touches. Garth prefers the Type B approach. A regular prayer warrior, he exults like his ancestor Gideon in the boldness that "lays a fleece before the Lord." Now there's a crafty dodge: all the benefits of a leap from temple-top (v. 6) with none of the risk. In either case God gets pushed to strut God's parental stuff. Between fleeces Garth scours his biography for little nuggets of happy happenstance, for him the only reliable signs that the stuff has been strutted. When he finds them he brags. When he doesn't he mopes. Not that Greta notices. She's too busy strutting stuff of her own—or trying to. Do I criticize, by the way? Hardly at all. Truth be told, I mostly admire these two, working and praying as they do. Shouldn't all Godsons do the same? So I commonly think, at any rate, and that's my problem. Yours too, I'll guess.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Credentials Challenged

Back to Garth and Greta. To see what's driving them take the word "if," turn it upside down, and move the "i" so it sits directly above the base of the "f." What you're looking at now is the hook they swallowed with their mother's milk. (Recall Ash Wednesday's psalm, 51:5). It's buried still in their bellies, or wherever the seat of believing might happen to be. More specifically, it attaches to prior words that God himself placed

there, divinely authorized assertions about who they are, be these the vaguer inklings that all people are privy to (Ps. 19:2, Rom. 1:19) or the unambiguous announcements of Godsonian identity that capped off their baptisms. (cf. 3:17). From time to time the hook's master gives it a twitch—a reminder to her that she's working too hard, a suggestion to him that he's bleating into a void. "How can this be," he hisses, "'if you are a Godson' (vv. 3, 6)? Aren't Godsons the 'beloved...with whom [God'] is well pleased' (3:17)?" The hiss continues: "Real Godsons, more so even than real Rockefellers, don't scurry over questions of what they'll eat, drink or wear when tomorrow arrives (6:31, 34), or what school their kids will go to. Nor do they heap up prayers as the Gentiles do (6:7). But you're doing both, aren't you. So prove that you are who you say you are-or make God prove it." Thus the line that Garth and Greta fall for every time. Falling for it, they work all the harder at validating their birthright, though the harder they work, the more reason they have to doubt, and the deeper the hook digs in. A vicious circle, is it not? I know it all too well myself. You too, I'll warrant.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *"You've Got to Be Kidding!"*

Vicious circles spinning swiftly will throw the people who are trying to ride them. Thrown from this one, "the heirs of the [Godson] kingdom" are bound to find themselves on hands and knees in "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (8:12). Think of the latter as an infernal hymn, keened and clanged to the perverse glory of the one that Garth and Greta are worshipping already (v. 9). Worshipping the devil? Isn't that much too harsh a description of their present behavior? Of mine and yours as well? But consider. Whose word has commanded their obedience? To whom are they presently bending the knee of trust? It isn't God. Else, like Jesus,

they'd have long since spat the hook and told the tempter to fish in other waters (v. 10, "Away with you!"). But they haven't. Frankly they can't. Once hooked, forever caught, as Adam and Eve learned the moment they scrabbled for fig leaves (Gen. 3:7). Godsons live by "every" word God utters (v. 4, citing Deut. 4:3), not merely by some of the words. One of those God-uttered words—it forms the conclusion of the passage Jesus cites—is an "if" of God's own: "If you...go after other gods [or devils] and serve them and worship them...you will surely perish" (Deut. 4:19). Where untrusting Garth and Greta are concerned this "if" is no mere hook in the belly. It's a gaff through the gills, portending the final realization of the disowning they dread. "Truly I tell you, I do not know you" (25:12). That for sure is when they are Godsons no more.

PROGNOSIS: "The Godsons? Why Of Course!"

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *"Who Else Could It Be?"*

But again, Jesus didn't. He didn't, that is, chomp down on the tempter's hook. Not then in the desert, not later when he was "led by the Spirit" (v. 1) to the last place a Godson will be caught dead in. And even there—even in the extremity of finding that God, far from being well pleased, has forsaken him (27:46)—he refuses to strut his Godsonian stuff (27:42b) or whine at God to strut it for him (27:43a). Instead he shoves the tempter's words down the throats of his minions by doing the very thing they mock him for. "He trusts in God" (27:43a). He does it so well that the earth rumbles its approval (27:51b) and the least clued in of all the onlookers are driven to the inescapable conclusion: "Truly this man was God's Son" (27:54), a.k.a. THE Godson. That this has implications for Garth, Greta, and the all the rest of us lesser Godsons is signaled by the detail of the dead emerging from their tombs (27:52). And why not? For in the "one man's act of righteousness" (Rom. 5:18, the

day's epistle) Christ has buried the hooks of both "ifs," God's and the devil's, deep in the ground where they can hurt us no more. (Remember Step Two's image of the i-over-f upended? Slide the bar toward the top, sink the bottom third below an imagined surface, and guess what you're looking at?) More plainly: having proved his bona fides by refusing to prove them, our Lord emerges on the third day as the One True Godson with the authority to exercise all rights and privileges appertaining thereto (28:18). Notice how, in his first decree, he trumps older words with a new word that ignores the annoying doubt of his Godson kinfolk and invests them all with life and purpose anyway (Mt. 28:17b, 19-20).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Credentials Confirmed

Something else to notice: how this new word of Christ's has thrown a life-saving monkey wrench into Garth and Greta's vicious circle. It's not that the circle quits spinning altogether. That won't happen until the two of them are dead. But the new word interferes with its operation and slows it down. Incessantly repeated—seventy times seven, if it comes to that (18:22)—it gives Garth and Greta a fresh breath of real hope. Again, the word defines them as Godson kin in spite of their stupid, sinful doubting. It announces that Jesus Godson, the man who lived and lives still by every God-uttered word, did this for them, and still does. It then offers itself as the one and only word that Garth and Greta finally live by. What's more, this new word is magnificently hook-proof. No "ifs" attach to it, not the devil's, not God's. "You praying fool," comes the hiss. "That I am," answers Garth. "Then again, Christ wasn't. He wasn't—for me. So buzz off. Annoy someone else." Ditto for Greta as she struggles with her instincts to overdo, and with the accusation that attends this habit. The beauty is that Christ-for-her—for her precisely in her frantic doubt and sinning—is a

matter of sheer fact. Established as such by the God who raised this Son from the dead and gave him his authority, it cannot be gainsaid or overthrown. Wouldn't you know, there lies the proof Greta was looking for all along, that a Godson she is and always will be. Let a hurricane of contrary intimation, her own or the devil's, assault this. It matters not. The proof stands.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – As Ones to the Manor Born

All of which portends a change in Garth and Greta's behavior, especially as they join forces in telling this new word back and forth to each other, or as they hear and encounter it in the company of other struggling saints. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," Paul exhorts them (Col. 3:16), repeating what Christ has told them in the first place. "Go. Make disciples of all nations," (28:19) not forgetting that you yourselves are included in that designation. The word told and heard invariably bears fruit (13:8). Not that Garth and Greta will quit being Garth and Greta. She'll still squeeze stones for blood; he'll still presume mightily on the providence of God. Of course these things are more than inbred inclinations. They're also God-given talents (25:15). What changes with exposure to Christ's new word is the object of the squeezing and presuming. Instead of strutting her stuff to make her own point about Greta, she starts strutting it to make Christ's point about the folks around her, especially the hungry, the sick, the stranger, the convict (25:35-36). What point? That they too are Godsons (5:3, 25:40) to whom God in God's time sends ministering angels (v. 11b), she among them. As for Garth, he pushes God not for a few more nuggets in his own résumé—why, when it sparkles already with the gem of Christ?—but rather for bread and life granted to all God's children (15:26-28). Nor will it bug him should his own bio feature hard time in a wilderness. Instead he counts it an honor to have suffered with Christ. The upshot of all this?

The bona fides leak through. They start looking and sounding like genuine Godsons, recognizably connected to the true Godson; and the tempter's work gets ever harder; and God is worshipped through Christ their Lord (28:17a). "Grant this, O Lord, to us all. Amen."

Note: for much of the above packed wonderfully into three brief hymn stanzas, see Lutheran Book of Worship #484, "God my Lord my Strength my Place of Hiding."