

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord (Yahweh)... you will be saved”

A Lenten Homily delivered by Len Friesen at WNMC (Matins Service)

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Luke 4: 1-13; Romans 10: 8b-13.

Yahweh is the earliest name used for God in the Old Testament, but it really is no name at all. Instead, it is a string of letters without vowels, and even then the Children of Israel rarely pronounced it. They rightly feared that even to name the matchlessly Divine was somehow to denigrate him. This ineffable name is first used in Exodus 3: 14 when Moses asks the almighty divine how the Children of Israel should address him. And the almighty declares simply in Exodus 3: 14: *“I am who I am,”* the letters of which spell “Yahweh”. The Divine’s name, in other words, is “No Name”.

Well the word *Yahweh* is Old Testament Hebrew but the New Testament is written in Greek, and when the first writers translated *Yahweh* into Greek they chose the word “*Kyrios*”. This is all immensely relevant to today’s readings, as the Confession that will save us from our Romans 10 text begins *“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord... you will be saved”*. But it could just as accurately be translated *“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Yahweh you will be saved”*. The fact that both Jesus and the Father are referred to interchangeably as “Lord” (*Kyrios*) throughout the New Testament takes us 5 minutes away from the doctrine of the Trinity, of the ineffable divine as eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (which is not at all the same thing Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, all of which point to Christ anyway.)

All of this matters profoundly as we enter the Lenten season through the Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness from today’s gospel reading in Luke 4. To fully understand Christ’s encounter with the devil we really ought to review all of human history, which am I’m happy to do this morning. I have time! ☺

In the beginning when our Lord created the universe he made everything perfectly good, even male and female. How could it be otherwise when our Lord himself is eternally the perfection of Love and Beauty? That’s why there was no death, for example, in our Lord’s plan of creation. The problem is that our Lord created us as more than robots who would be compelled to worship him. For we were also created

with a Free Will to follow, or not, and the story of the Bible is that when tempted in the Garden by the serpent, we have all followed Adam in willfully choosing to follow other gods. It is by our willful disobedience that we created the one thing in our power to create, which is sin, and as those Billboards on Hwy 86 annoyingly remind us, the Wages of Sin is death. This is why death is not a natural human condition. Our Lord did not create us to die.

The problem, however, is that once sin entered the world we could not free ourselves from its power, which is how we end up thinking that death is natural. We could not, we still cannot bridge the gap between our sinfulness and the divine Kyrios who made us. If it was only up to us, then, what right would we have to seek mercy from the One who created us as we approach our final days? What right would we have to seek and expect good in the midst of so much brokenness here on earth?

This is where our Gospel reading from Luke 4 comes in, because in a series of encounters with the devil Jesus resists all temptation, thus making his divine Son-ship plain at the outset of his ministry. Christ is not tempted by bodily satisfaction in the first temptation, he is not tempted by worldly power and wealth in the 2nd; and he is not tempted to worship other gods in the 3rd temptation.

For Luke the message is clear: In resisting every temptation Jesus is Yahweh, the eternal Word made flesh. He has made right what Adam tore asunder in the Garden, and what we still struggle to get right when the tempter tempts us in our time. Do you know what the surest sign is that Luke has the first Adam in mind when he talks about the temptation of Christ? It is the fact that immediately before today's Gospel reading Luke produces a genealogy of our Lord, though unlike Matthew 1 he does so from present to past, working backwards if you will, such that the last name mentioned before the Temptation of Christ is, any guesses?, Adam's name, but it could just as easily be my name, or yours.

In one of the church's earliest confessions of the Christian faith St. Athanasius declared in the 4th century that in Jesus "*the matchlessly Divine took our form so that we one day might take on his*" (repeat). In other words, in Jesus Christ our Lord, Yahweh has bridged a gap that he did not create and we could not and cannot overcome on our

own. It is only because of Christ's great emptying that we can stare at death and say with the Apostle Paul: *Death where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?*

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the start of the 40 day period that will result in the Passion of our Lord, a passion by which Christ will take on our sins, even though he himself was without sin. Our Lord will do so to the point of death, death on the cross, which is already anticipated in the last verse of our Gospel readings where we read: *"When the devil had finished every test he departed from Jesus until an opportune time."* That opportune time will be Good Friday, which itself will be obliterated by Easter Sunday's resurrection, and this takes us back to Romans 10 which I now want to read in its entirety: *"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord (that is, Yahweh) and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved."*

All of this might sound airy/fairy but it is anything but, for like the first Adam we too know the tempter's allure. I don't know what temptations have you most in thrall at the moment: perhaps the temptation of physical pleasure over consolation in the living Christ, or over the needs of other; perhaps you are tempted to doubt Christ's ultimate power over sin and death. Perhaps you are tempted by doubt or despair more generally. Or it could be the temptation to put our faith in gods other than the One who created us; the One who took on our form to the point of death on a cross so that we might one day take on his form by dying in His name, a death we've already entered in through baptism anyway.

The Lenten journey is not one undertaken for the endlessly distracted or the faint of heart. But it is undertaken by those who are willing to name the temptations that hold them most in thrall right now. No wonder this is a period associated with particularly intense prayer, fasting and almsgiving. By this means we ponder what hope we would have in this world or the next if our sins and our dying were the final word. It is into this existentially hopeless world, into our world, that the living Christ comes again in this Lenten season. Again this year Christ will take on our sins, including even our dying, and he does so for our salvation and for the salvation of the world.

May our Lenten prayer in 2019 be one with the words we will shortly sing:

*“When we face temptation’s power, lonely, struggling filled with dread
Christ, who knew the tempter’s hour, come and be our living bread.
By your grace protect, preserve us, lest we fall, your trust betray
Yours above all other voices, be the Word we hear, obey.”
Amen.*