

For what would you sell your soul to the devil?

Folklore and legend are full of stories of people who made pacts with the devil.

Back in the 6th century \*St. Theophilus of Adana was a very humble fellow who declined to become a bishop. But the man who was appointed bishop instead of him made his life a misery and he was so upset that he made a covenant with the devil, signed in his blood, in which he renounced both Christ and the Virgin Mary. In return, the devil made him bishop after all. But then he repented and God forgave him but the devil still had the covenant. Theophilus woke up one morning to find the bloody covenant on his chest. He took it to the legitimate bishop and confessed what he had done. The bishop burned it, and all was well.

It did not go so well for \*Paganini in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was a violinist and composer who wrote such complex pieces, many of which he could only play himself, that he was said to have made an agreement with the devil. Some even claimed that they saw the devil on stage with him. So widespread were the rumors that when he died Paganini was refused a normal Christian burial.

But more common are the stories of slow burning greed or desire that lead to tragic ends. \*Like Macbeth, a good man and loyal subject whose ambition gradually leads him down a path of bad decision after bad decision, murder after murder, encouraged by the three witches on the heath, until eventually he himself is killed.

I think this is more common than the direct confrontation with the forces of evil that Jesus experienced. We get out of integrity and then start making decisions to protect ourselves or to help us get us more in an apparent world of scarcity. And it gets worse. And we get mired in a downward spiral. Till we are digging a deeper and deeper hole and we can't get out.

Perhaps this is what has happened for \*Putin – what started as a desire for a bigger country, more power, more security has turned into a nightmare from which he cannot extract himself. My prayer is that he finds a way to change before even more lives are lost and devastated.

Fortunately, we are not Putin nor Macbeth – our tragedies are played out in much smaller ways.

And they need not be tragedies.

\*Because Jesus did not sell his soul to the devil. Not when he was tempted in the desert and not when the devil returned “at an opportune time” and Jesus was falsely accused and scandalously executed. Jesus did not sell his soul to the devil nor did he succumb to slow burning tragedy.

Today we see him at the beginning of his ministry facing his opponent. Evil personified. Offering him quick fixes, quick ways to get power and acclaim, but fixes which were not in alignment with Jesus’ deeper mission. Fixes which would have undone his integrity.

\*He could have used his Godly power to make bread or something even tastier. Why didn’t he? Because he incarnated as fully human and it would have denied his humanness. Jesus was not Superman and didn’t intend to be. It was not his path. His path was to be fully human, just like you and me, and to demonstrate how we can walk with God and of course, his path was to overcome evil.

And he succeeded.

Here in the desert after a very long time without food Jesus did not betray his mission, he stayed on course; he did not agree to exchange his mission for power, and he did not take the fast path to fame and fortune.

\*Jesus won and the devil left - “he departed from him until an opportune time.”

Menacing words.

We all know the truth of them. We face our fears, our traumas, our inadequacies, and the weird coping mechanisms we developed to deal with them; we face them with as much courage and honesty as we can muster. But they return at an opportune time. They return when we are hungry, angry, lonely or tired. They return also when we have a new level of spiritual development to bring to bear. In fact, the opportune time is likely to be when we are stronger; and each time we face the devil that we know in ourselves it is a little different until one day we can just notice that its there and keep going without missing a beat.

What was the opportune time for Jesus? \*Perhaps it was when he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he knew that the time of his torture and death had finally come, when he was sweating blood and his friends couldn't keep their eyes open. When he was so alone he prayed "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt 26:39). Was that when the devil returned?

Or was it later, on the cross when he was in agony, scarcely able to breathe?

Was Jesus tempted to walk away from it all? To use his superhuman powers to save himself? I know I would have been.

\*But he didn't. He did not give in to the temptation to step away from the path that he had laid out in obedience to his Father, our Creator, and in so doing he became our Redeemer.

And that's why we are here together this morning. Because Jesus the Christ did not give in. He did not make a pact with the devil. He did not sell his soul, but remained divinely human even as humanity did its worst. And then, and then, he was resurrected in the final triumph. The worst that evil can do is to kill us. \*But Jesus rose again, showing that even death is a hollow victory for the forces of evil.

Yes there are times when evil prevails. Times in our lives when it seems that we don't have the strength to pray, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." There are times when we read the news and it seems that evil is everywhere. It seems that evil is prevailing in Ukraine today.

But we know better. \*We know how the story ends. We know that resurrection happens, that Christ prevails and that this is just a mirage, the forces of evil playing themselves out in a losing battle. Because Jesus did not give in.

And Jesus is with us every moment. \*The Holy Spirit is working in our hearts and minds and in the hearts and minds of those around us. God is constantly offering us the possibility of life and hope and the promise of grace.

People of God, we need not be afraid because the forces of evil are never strong enough to prevail against the Word of God. As the apostle Paul said, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?... we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. \*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31, 37b-39).