

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13; Hebrews 4:14-16; Matthew 4:1-11
February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

NO DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today at 2:00 p.m. the UNC-Wilmington theater department will present “Dr. Faustus.” The production will be set in a rock and roll dream world and is based on the 16th century play by Christopher Marlowe. The full title of the original play was “The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus. Marlowe fashioned his play on old German folk tales about Doctor Faustus, an academic who made a deal with the devil, Lucifer, who is represented by the character Mephistophilis. Faustus gets bored with the regular academic subjects and trades his soul for twenty-four years of knowing and practicing the black arts and magic. Despite his misgivings about his deal with the devil as the end gets nearer, and frantic attempts to get out of the deal, Faustus is killed at the stroke of midnight.¹

One legend says that when Doctor Faustus was first performed, actual devils showed up on stage and drove some audience members crazy. From that tragic story we get the phrase “a Faustian bargain.” This means trading in your values and morals, exchanging who you really are for some apparently awesome short-term goal. Of course, the bargain is made without regard for the long-term, horrible consequences.

The story of the Faustian bargain has been retold many times. One of the most well-known versions is the Broadway musical *Damn Yankees*, about middle-aged real estate agent Joe Boyd selling his soul to Mr. Applegate. In return, he gets to be “Joe Hardy,” a star baseball player with the Washington Senators. Part of the deal requires Joe to leave his wife, Meg. But Joe negotiates an escape clause with Mr. Applegate and, at the very last minute, escapes from his deal with the devil. Joe ends up hitting the winning home run in the World Series and is reunited with his beloved Meg.

The other familiar retelling of this story, of course, is Charlie Daniels singing and playing “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.” When I texted Dr. Dan the title of today’s sermon, he asked me if I was going to sing or read the lyrics to that song. I replied, “You never know what might show up in the sermon.” Dan immediately shot back, “And you don’t know what may show up Sunday” with a little demon emoji, to which I replied, “Yeah, that’s what worries me.”

Charlie Daniels said he was inspired by a poem by Stephen Vincent Benet called “The Mountain Whippoorwill,” about a fiddlin’ contest between a mountain boy and Old Dan Wheeling who’s “got bee-honey in his strings.” There is a lot of Biblical imagery in the poem, including Satan, Moses, the Red Sea. At the end of the poem, the mountain boy thinks, “I’ve fiddled all night an’ lost, Yo’re a good hill-

billy, but yuh've been bossed." So I went to congratulate old man Dan, — But he put his fiddle into my han' — An' then the noise of the crowd began!" In Charlie Daniels' song, the Devil makes a deal with young Johnny, because the Devil is behind on meeting his quota for souls — "Johnny, rosin up your bow and play your fiddle hard, 'Cause hell's broke loose in Georgia and the Devil deals the cards And if you win you'll get this shiny fiddle made of gold, But if you lose, the Devil gets your soul!" Of course, Johnny outplays the Devil and "The Devil bowed his head because he knew that he'd been beat And he laid that golden fiddle on the ground at Johnny's feet."

Jesus was offered a Faustian bargain, a deal with the devil, out there in the wilderness. The devil didn't offer Jesus all kinds of secret knowledge or the chance to be the star in the World Series or a shot at a golden fiddle. But the devil did tempt Jesus to be someone and something other than who he really was and what he was supposed to do. The third and final temptation is the one that really sounds like a deal with the devil: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'" We can ask if the devil really had the authority to make that offer, but in a way it doesn't matter. If the offer's legit and Jesus accepts it, the devil's got him. If the offer's a lie and Jesus accepts it anyway, the devil's got him just the same. The truth is, all three temptations — bread, showing off, and the splendors of the world — tempt Jesus to forget his true identity.

When I was a teenager and would leave the house to go out with my friends, my parents used to tell me (in these words or others), "Remember who you and whose you are." In those seven words, my folks reminded me of how I had been raised and what they expected of me, and they expressed their love and concern for me. Unfortunately, I have to confess I didn't always remember who I was and whose I was.

In a nutshell, that is the true temptation Jesus faces out there in the wilderness after fasting for forty days and forty nights. Will he remember who he is and whose he is? At this point in the gospel, **we** know who Jesus is, because Matthew lets us watch as Jesus gets baptized in the water and "just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16-17) That's **who** Jesus is. That's **whose** Jesus is. Now what is he going to do with it?

Since we know who Jesus is (God's beloved Son), it might seem kind of strange to hear the devil say in the first two temptations, "**If** you are the Son of God, change these stones into bread, throw yourself down . . ." In the gospels the devil and his demons always know who Jesus is. They recognize and respect his authority and power over them. So the devil isn't wondering **if** Jesus is the Son of God. He knows who Jesus is and whose Jesus is. And that's the devil's point and his temptation — "**Since** you are the beloved Son of God, use your powers to serve yourself. You know you're famished. What's it gonna hurt to make yourself a little bread? **Since** you are the beloved Son of God, use your position to wow the crowds. Think how much more you will get done if you've already won them over." This is the same temptation Jesus faced as he hung on

the cross. With the very same words as the devil, people passed by and mocked Jesus and said, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” (Matthew 27:40)

Matthew tells us “In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, “I am God’s Son.”’” (Matthew 27:41-43) The religious leaders are mocking Jesus, but ironically they are speaking God’s truth — “He saved other; he cannot save himself.” If Jesus had made a Faustian bargain there on the cross, he would have enjoyed the short-term gain of escaping the cross, but he would have suffered the long-term consequences of being unfaithful to the God he said he trusted. And that’s not to mention the long-term consequences for you and me, if Jesus had come down from the cross.

So, let’s go all the way back to the wilderness, where Jesus was tempted by the devil. At the beginning of his ministry, he faced the same temptation that cropped up all through his ministry. In fact, it’s the same temptation Adam and Eve faced in the garden. Would they be true to who they are and whose they are? Would God’s promise be sufficient in their lives? The serpent’s temptation with the fruit is the same as the devil’s in the wilderness — Do you think God is really telling you the truth? Can you really trust God to do as he promised you? What if . . .?

Today’s epistle lesson from Hebrews 4:14-16 is often used as a call to confession in worship: “Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Someone commented that those verses might not be much comfort or offer much hope, because we probably won’t ever face the same temptations Jesus faced out there in the wilderness. Really, will we ever be tempted to turn stones into bread? Jump off the highest point to see if the angels will rescue us? Bow down at the devil’s feet and inherit the kingdoms of the world?

But notice what the Hebrews passage doesn’t say. It doesn’t say, “because we have in every respect been tested as Jesus was.” It does say, “we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are.” We may not be able to change stones into bread, but we are certainly tempted to trade long-term benefits and righteousness for

short-term gains and pleasure. We may not throw ourselves off of the highest point, but we are certainly tempted to give in to the whims of the crowd around us so we can be popular and fit in and, maybe, even further our own agendas. We may not physically bow down at the feet of a man in a red suit with horns and forked tail in exchange for the world’s riches, but we are certainly tempted to go along to get along, to compromise here and there. Somehow we convince ourselves that those

compromises won't amount to much, but they have a way of adding up, and then we find we've sold ourselves out.

Someone has said that the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is a story about "the core of what it means to be human," which is another way of talking about "who we are and whose we are." The basic underlying temptation is "to treat God as less than God." He says, "We are constantly tempted to mistrust God's readiness to empower us to face our trials. We are frequently tempted to question God's helpfulness when things go awry. . . compromise with the ways of the world is a continuing seduction. It is indeed difficult for us to worship and serve God only."²

But, we might protest, since Jesus was the Son of God, it must have been easier for him to be faithful to God than it is for us. If we believe that, we're fooling ourselves and looking for a way out. Jesus chose to live his life defined by who he was and whose he was, and it led him straight to the cross. But even on the cross he didn't make a deal with the devil. And, thank God he didn't, because by staying up on the cross, Jesus saved us from our sins.

Yes, it's true we are not the Son of God, but scripture reminds us, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (1 John 3:1) That's who we're called to be. That's whose we're called to be. When we forget that and don't live as the children of God, we can thank God we have a Lord and Savior who didn't make a deal with the devil, "but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:15b-16)

Let us pray: God, you know our hearts. You have knitted our inmost being and you know our deepest desires, fears and worries. Help us on our journey during this Lenten season into a new awareness of your presence in our lives. Save us from our own temptations, so that we may more freely follow you. Amen.

NOTES

¹This information comes from different sources:

www.uncw.edu/theatre/Productions

www.en.wikipedia.org

"Marlowe's Doctor Faustus: Summary & Analysis," at www.study.com.

²Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 22-26.