

Get behind me, Satan!

August 31, 2008 | Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 17)

Lectionary citations

Ex 3:1-15 with Ps 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c
Rom 12:9-21
Matt 16:21-28

In the Gospels, two disciples betray Jesus. One is obvious: Judas Iscariot, who sold his Lord and Savior for 30 pieces of silver. The other betrayer is Peter, the rock of the Church. One betrayer went down to death, becoming "the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled." The other went on to a long career preaching, teaching, and baptizing. I am bringing them together because, after the initial temptation in the desert, it is Judas and Peter who are most associated with Satan in the Gospels. Both Judas and Peter failed Jesus' trust and served Satan, the adversary. Yet their destinies were quite different.

Satan is only mentioned a few times in the Old Testament, most vividly in the Book of Job.

On another day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. And the LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it." Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason." "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face." The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life."

Luke and John report Satan entering Judas at the time of his betrayal of Jesus. Judas remains a strange and confusing figure. In Luke, Jesus prays all night before he picks the twelve disciples, including Judas.

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

In the Book of Acts, which we are now studying on Wednesday nights, Peter explains Judas' betrayal of Jesus as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was one of our number and shared in our ministry.

Note that Peter states that Judas "shared in our ministry." It is challenging to think about Judas participating in the ministry of the disciples. It is sobering to think of Judas healing, preaching, teaching, and casting out demons, just like the other disciples. That is one scene that I do not think has ever been portrayed in religious paintings or stained glass windows!

We might think that Judas' destiny to betray Jesus might show up in a character flaw. However, John is the only Gospel that suggests that Judas may have been a "bad apple" from the start. John has Jesus calling Judas a "devil" long before the last supper and John calls Judas a thief. When Mary anoints Jesus with expensive perfume, Judas objects.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

In a very speculative way, we might tell the story like this. Judas was a disciple just like the rest. However, he had one weakness, a weakness that made him the one destined to betray Jesus. He loved money. He believed that money had the power to do good, to improve the lot of the poor. He enjoyed managing the common purse and did a good job of it. It was only fair if he took a little for himself now and then, just as a reward for all his hard work. Judas may have been disappointed in Jesus' ministry in some way. Judas may have respected Jesus as a Rabbi and a Prophet, but I do not think he accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Jesus was clearly not the one who will restore the Kingdom of Israel. Judas may have felt he had the right to judge Jesus and decide his fate, "for the sake of the nation." This arrogance might have been enough to open Judas' heart to Satan, the adversary. Once Satan was in control, the thirty pieces of silver offered for the location of Jesus' nighttime hideaway might have looked very attractive. After all, thirty pieces is a substantial amount, the traditional value of a slave, Judas may have thought he could do some good with the money. Judas may have fooled himself into believing that Jesus would not be executed.

Peter's explanation, that Judas' actions were a necessary fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy was sufficient for the early church. This was probably no comfort to Judas, who either hung himself, or more horribly, fell down and burst open like an overripe piece of fruit. We struggle with the story of Judas because we think that individual choice and character should determine our fates, not ancient prophecies. We are more comfortable attributing his actions to greed and arrogance rather than destiny or the work of Satan.

We may not be surprised at Judas' link to Satan, but it is unexpected to have Jesus calling Peter, the leader of the disciples, "Satan." Last Sunday, we heard Jesus bless Peter when Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Jesus stated that Jesus' Father in heaven had given this truth to Peter. This week, Jesus condemns Peter as speaking not for the Father, but for Satan, the adversary.

When Jesus says that he must suffer and die Peter replies, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." To Jesus, Peter is certainly taking "the Name of the Lord thy God in vain." Jesus tells Peter, "Peter, you are not thinking God's thoughts." Peter's motivation is clearly his love of Jesus and his desire to protect Jesus from harm. Peter's love for Jesus has element of selfishness. This came out on the mountain of the transfiguration, where Peter dreamed of staying with Jesus high above the World's problems. Peter cannot see that if Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, that Jesus must go to the cross. In this way, Peter is speaking for Satan, who in the second temptation dared Jesus to call upon his Father to protect himself from harm.

Satan comes up again in relation to Peter in Luke's version of the Last Supper. Peter has accepted that Jesus may have to suffer and die. In fact, he offers to go along. However, Jesus knows better.

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."

Peter has once again treated Jesus' situation as merely a human situation, one that Peter is confident he can handle. Peter thinks he is ready to face a scrap with the Temple police or the Roman garrison and willing to go down fighting. Peter has opened himself up to being sifted...shaken by Satan, to see whether he is wheat or chaff. Like Job, Peter and the disciples will be tested. The person they love most in life, their Master and Teacher, Jesus, will be taken from them, beaten, tortured, and crucified. They all will fail, Peter most of all.

According to Matthew, when Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he tried to return the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.

"I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

That is a kind of repentance. Judas realized he had shed innocent blood. However, he clearly did not recognize that there was one person who could forgive him even of this sin, Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He did not even ask. Instead, Judas did what he could on his own—returning the money and killing himself. That was all he could do without God's help.

Jesus was arrested. As Matthew puts it, "all the disciples deserted him and fled." Peter, cursing, denied knowing Jesus. The women watched the crucifixion from a distance. Yet none of them was lost. Although they could not understand what was happening, in their hearts they knew Jesus was still with them. They visited the empty tomb and huddled in the locked room. They stayed true to their Lord. Knowing that there was no human solution to this unimaginable disaster, they waited for God to act and save them. And God did save them. The risen Christ came to them and in time, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter was forgiven, along with the rest and after Pentecost did much more than he could ever imagine to strengthen his brothers and sisters, never again forgetting that Jesus was the Messiah,

the Son of the Living God. And by the Grace of God, Peter followed his Lord to the end of Peter's life, building a Church for all people, a Church that would spread the Good News to all corners of the earth until the end of the World. Amen.

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