

“Crossroads Blues”

“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

“I went down to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.”

Robert Johnson was one of the greatest blues musicians of all time, a recognition that came largely after his death at age 27. The songs he recorded in his brief career, including “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom” and “Sweet Home Chicago,” have become blues standards, recorded by such diverse artists as Muddy Water, Elmore James, Eric Clapton, and the Rolling Stones. But his lasting fame is also due to the mythology that surrounds the source of his musical talent: Son House, a famed blues musician and contemporary of Johnson, claimed that he was a terrible guitarist until he disappeared for a few weeks in Clarksdale Mississippi. Legend has it that Johnson took his guitar to the crossroads of Highways 49 and 61, where he made a deal with the devil, who gave him his remarkable talents in exchange for his soul. While this reported “deal with the devil” may be unlikely, it is true that Johnson died at an early age, never to experience the fame he would achieve after his death. The lasting legacy of Robert Johnson lies both in his music and in the “Faustian bargain” that he purported made with the devil.

The “Faustian bargain” that is linked to the story of this bluesman is a deal in which one is *“willing to sacrifice anything to satisfy a limitless desire for knowledge or power.”* It is based on the story of Faust, hero of one of the most durable legends in Western folklore and literature, the story of a German astrologer who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power. While there was a historical Faust who lived in the 16th Century, the story was popularized by Christopher Marlowe in *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (1604) and by Goethe’s drama *Faust* (1808, 1832). This tale of temptation, of exchanging one’s eternal soul for temporal gain, continues to live on in countless stories and dramas, speaking to the power of persuasion that can cause a person to make a foolish choice that will have dire consequences.

The story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness confronts our Lord with such a “Faustian bargain,” the temptation that the devil presents to him to misuse his divine powers for his personal gain. Each of the temptations are challenges to Jesus because he has the power to accomplish them, but doing so would mean compromising with Satan and making concessions to popular demands. Each offers Jesus tantalizing possibilities, but would mean striking a “Faustian bargain” with the devil that would not only impact Jesus’ future but also the future of the people he has come to redeem.

The story of Jesus’ temptation in Luke’s Gospel begins following his baptism by John in the Jordan, when *“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.”* (4:1-2). The period of forty days evokes Israel’s forty years of testing (*“According to the number of days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.”* – Numbers 14:34). When Jesus is in a vulnerable position, weakened by hunger, the devil appears with the first temptation that challenges Jesus to exploit his sonship for his own benefit: *“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”* (4:3). A temptation is only effective if it is possible; while this would be no temptation for us, it was a real temptation for Jesus whose divine nature could have made this possible. Jesus could have easily turned a stone into bread to satisfy his hunger, but in doing so he would be misusing the gift he possessed for a purpose other than that for which God intended. So Jesus responds not with us own words but with a quote from Scripture: *“Jesus answered him, ‘it is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”* (4:4). In quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus evokes God’s provision of manna in the wilderness, which God provided daily to meet the people’s needs. Jesus is challenged to repeat this sign of God’s providing for God’s

people, but if he makes bread for himself he abuses his divine powers to serve his own needs, rather than also depending on God's provision to "give us this day our daily bread."

The second temptation presents Jesus with a true "Faustian bargain" of the possibility of gaining power by compromise. The devil offers Jesus a Faustian deal: worship me, and all the kingdoms of the world will be yours. The Son of God would indeed have authority over all the kingdoms of the earth ("All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." – Matthew 28:18), but this authority would come solely from God. Jesus once again responds to the devil's Faustian offer by quoting from the book of Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." (Deuteronomy 6:13). The authority of God, exercised by Jesus, is superior to the authority of the devil.

Noticing how Jesus uses Scripture to resist his temptations, the devil decides to "fight fire with fire" by framing the third temptation in a quotation from Scripture, quoting Psalm 91:11-12 (today's psalm reading) in challenging Jesus to put God's promise to the test. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and challenges him that "*if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'*" (4:9-11). But for a third time, Jesus turns to the book of Deuteronomy in refusing to put God to the test: "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*" (Deuteronomy 6:16). Jesus would fulfill his purpose as the Son of God not by escaping death, but by accepting death and defeating it. It is a command to which Jesus submits himself, even when he is tempted one last time in the Garden of Gethsemane to choose a path that would not lead to the Cross: "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.*" (22:42).

- "No one has words to tell the sufferings of our dear Lord Jesus in the garden. It is above all human thought and understanding, what had befallen that divine and godly man. More deeply has this man been distressed than anyone on earth. More sorely has he dreaded death than anyone else. And this was done for our sake." – Martin Luther, 1534.

Having failed in his three attempts to strike a "Faustian bargain" with Jesus in the wilderness, the devil "*departed from him until an opportune time.*" (4:13), foreshadowing Satan's return in the events leading up to Jesus' death:

- "The Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them." – 22:3.
- "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your won faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." – 22:31-32.
- "When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!" – 22:53.

While Luke's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is paralleled in both Matthew and Mark, there is no such account in John's Gospel. Instead, Jesus faces temptation throughout his ministry in the Fourth Gospel. Following the feeding of the 5,000, the crowd seeks Jesus out again, hoping that he will make bread for them: "*What sign are you going to give us then, so that we might see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*" (John 6:30-31). At the Jewish festival of Booths, his brothers tempted Jesus to "*leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret.*" (7:3). The coming of the Greeks who request "*sir, we wish to see Jesus*" (12:20) presents Jesus with the temptation of whether he should asked to be delivered from his hour: "*Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, for this reason I have come to this hour.*" (12:27). Jesus would face temptations throughout his life; and the fact that he was tempted as we are tempted is the source of our strength to overcome the temptations that we will face, the "Faustian bargains" that may at first appear attractive but come with serious consequences:

- “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 great 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.” – Hebrews 4:14-16.

Jesus experiences temptation both in the wilderness and throughout his life because trials and temptations are a part of the human experience. Even if we do not have the ability to turn stones into bread, all of us are tempted to use the gifts and talents we possess in ways that are contrary to the manner in which God intended them to be used. This is why the people of Israel are commanded in today’s First Lesson from Deuteronomy – the same book from which Jesus quotes to refute the devil’s temptations – to recite a creedal statement when they present their gifts at the Festival of Ingathering (a type of harvest festival similar to Thanksgiving) that is an open acknowledgment that the land upon which this food was given is a gift from God, given to Israel’s ancestors when they were landless and impoverished:

- “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, that you, O LORD, have given me.” – Deuteronomy 26:5-9.

The people are called to remember that Israel had been brought into existence by divine grace and continued to be saved by grace alone. In presenting their “first fruits,” the finest produce of the harvest, God’s people are called to remember that “all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,” and that our call to stewardship is to use the gifts God has entrusted to us for the purposes God intends and not to be tempted to use them for our own selfish gain or in manner that is not in keeping with the Will of God.

As we present our gifts to the Lord this morning, we are also called to remember that it is through God’s goodness that we have been blessed *“with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions,”* and are called by God to *“use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.”* (ELW p. 107). We are called to recognize *“that with all we are and all that we have we are God’s stewards”* (Hanns Lilje), and that as Christ was able to resist the temptation to misuse these gifts for our own selfish purposes or to strike a “Faustian bargain” that would trade that which is eternal for something merely temporary. As Christ was able to resist temptation through the power of God’s Word, we look to Christ the living word that will give us the strength to *“save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.”*

- “Temptation is a universal human experience. Had Jesus not been tempted, he would not really have been human. The temptations, therefore, are a vital part of the narrative Christology, which portrays Jesus as fully human. The author of Hebrews … asserts that Jesus ‘in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.’ The wonder is not that Jesus was incapable of sinning but that he was able to avoid sinning although he was tempted. Along with the birth narrative, therefore, the temptations make an important anti-docetic statement: Jesus was fully human and knew what it was to be tempted.” – Alan Culpepper.

When he went “down to the crossroads,” Robert Johnson made the fatal mistake of making a bargain with the devil instead of using the talents God had given him, which not only could have served him well but perhaps would not have resulted in such a short and tragic end of his life. The bargain that Faust strikes with the devil may have brought him some short-term gains, but what if he had decided to work with what God had entrusted to him rather than seek something that came at a tremendous cost. While none of us possess the abilities that Jesus had

as the one who had equality with God, each of us has been blessed with gifts and talents that have been entrusted to us to use for God's purpose, *"to equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."* (Ephesians 4:12-13). There will always be the temptation to misuse our gifts, to deny them to others or use them only when they serve our own purposes or fulfill our own desires. Such temptations will continue to come, because the Evil One who tempted Jesus when he was most vulnerable waits until an "opportune time" when he might exploit our weaknesses to lead us into temptation:

- "The devil awaits that opportune time with us, that time when he can appeal to our injured pride, our wounded ego, our fear of not being appreciated, our anger at being ignored. These are those opportune times when the devil's persistence reaps great benefits." – Peter Gomes

When we find ourselves in such opportune times, we "take it to the Lord in prayer," turning to the one who overcame temptation and frees us from "sin, death, and the power of the devil." When we have *"trials and temptations – is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer."* Our Lord Jesus Christ overcame the same temptations that we will encounter, and teaches us to pray that we might be saved from the time of trial *"so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory."* (*Small Catechism*).

"Mephistopheles is not your name, but I know what you're up to just the same." (The Police, "Wrapped Around Your Finger").

We may not make a conscious decision to go "down to the crossroads," but it is inevitable that we will find ourselves at that intersection where there will be great temptations to travel a path other than the one God intends for us or to strike a "Faustian bargain" that seems appealing but masks dire consequences. At times of trial and temptation, we call out to our Lord who overcame the temptations he encountered in his wilderness crossroads, and gives us the ability to resist the temptations of the Evil One so that all that God has bestowed upon us – ourselves, our time, and our possessions – may be used for the purposes God desires, so that all may know God's love and the blessings that are ours in the one who delivers us from evil so that we might praise the one who is "the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever." Amen.