

## ***“The Savior and the Devil”***

March 1, 2009

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### ***Call to Worship***

Welcome to this House of Memory, where we remember those who have gone before us, preparing the way which we now walk.

Welcome to this House of Hope, where we recognize that people sitting here now will continue making the paths we can all walk upon as we venture to the Promised Land.

Hear now these words from Frederick Douglass (1818 –1895), American abolitionist, women's suffragist, editor, orator, author, statesman and reformer, and one of the most prominent figures in African-American and United States history. In 1872, Douglass became the first African American nominated as a Vice Presidential candidate in the U.S., running on the Equal Rights Party ticket with Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for President of the United States.

### **“The Limits of Tyrants” — Frederick Douglas - SLT #579:**

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground.

They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle.

Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.

Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them.

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Whoever you are, and wherever you are on this great pathway, join us today and let us walk together. Come, let us worship together now.

### ***Sermon: “The Savior and the Devil”***

Several weeks ago I decided to get a full-blown physical at Group Health. I hadn't had one for three or four years, and I had some concerns. So I was tested and tried in many ways, including blood tests and colon health evaluations and even a “barium swallow” to investigate some troubling throat symptoms I've been having.

As I proceeded through it all, I came to think of my doctor's role as either that of a Savior or that of a Devil, depending on what his final judgments might be. Good news or bad news?

As it turned out, I'm OK, *but*—and there's always a *but*—*only* if I start paying more attention to my life-style and begin to actively participate in my own health choices. So, my high blood pressure must be monitored, not only with medication, but with my choices of what I eat and drink. My cholesterol levels were on the edge, but could be controlled if I choose to do it. My near brush with onset diabetes could actually be averted if I would watch it carefully and do things that would fight it.

In all, the doctor's message to me is that my health is up to me and the choices I make. So I have begun my recovery with some basic life-style changes. I have returned to the gym and am actively trying to lose weight as well as tone up. I stopped drinking alcohol completely in order to counter its effects and to be more clear-headed in what I wanted to do. I began an intentional diet routine with the goal of losing weight, for being overweight can cause or be associated with a lot of health problems.

The doctor turned out to save me as he urgently advised me to pay attention to what's going on in my body and in my life. The Devil will have to wait.

This sermon, then, has been living in me during these anxious weeks. It began with the January 18th sermon, "A Savior", which spoke about our personal responsibility to creating justice and equity in the world and not expecting Barack Obama to save us by doing that.

At the beginning, I want to give credit to David Betz for the idea of this sermon. He wrote me a response to the January sermon, about which he said:

*"The point you made about NOT DELEGATING to any savior/saint etc. was compelling. It gave me an idea for another sermon for you—basically, the other side of that coin.*

*What about NOT DELEGATING BLAME to George W. Bush, Cheney, Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, (fill in the villain) for everything bad in the world? Is not everyone capable of evil, just as MLK suggested we are all capable of greatness?"*

My response to David was a hearty thanks (sometimes it's really is hard to come up with sermon ideas). And to say, his sermon is on the way, and now today, here it is.

The "Savior" sermon had a simple premise: The tendency for us to believe that Barack Obama (in all his glory) or that any other "savior" will save us from our dire situation is fatuous and misguided and well, just not true.

In this sense, Obama is not our Messiah. Neither was Abraham Lincoln or Dr. King. Neither in fact was Jesus. The role of a savior is to *point* us in directions we might not even want to go. The savior may even *lead* us toward the Promised Land. But, we cannot delegate the work of peacemaking and anti-racism and foreign policy and yes, spiritual and religious policy and practice to someone whom we would hold up as our savior. That is simply to say, we cannot hand over the responsibilities for our salvation to someone whom we expect to do the work for us.

Today we look at the other side of the coin which turns out to be very similar. How does the Devil fit into this paradigm?

Let us begin this investigation with a short review of the Devil's fascinating life in human history. According to the people who study these things, the Devil was born just about the same time that God was. That is, when humanity first began to accept the idea that there was One God who was supreme and who was the ultimate embodiment of goodness, they began exploring the idea that someone was needed to embody all that was evil.

Thus, 4,000 years ago the Zoroastrians came up with the universal and transcendent God they called Ahura Mazda, the supreme god of good. This was the first monotheistic religious creed: one God in all times and in all places. History shows that Judaism followed this lead, and then Christianity and then Islam.

But there was a problem: if God is good, then where does evil come from? Enter *Ahriman*, Zoroastrian god of chaos and natural opponent of Ahura Mazda. Again, Judaism and the other monotheistic religion followed suit. The Hebrews called him Satan, literally meaning "adversary". Other names include Lucifer, Prince of Darkness, the Evil One, Beelzebub, and in Greek *Diabolos*, the Devil (related to the English word diabolical).

The war between good and evil, between God and Satan, began. Throughout human history we have looked to someone to save us and to bring us health and goodness, even as we blamed someone else for leading us into the pathways of destruction and death.

This war was most formally presented in the ancient Hebrew story of Job, who was the object of a testing game between YHWH and Lucifer. Who would he look to and follow in the midst of the most dire of circumstances—the losing of his vast wealth, his family, and even his health? And who would he blame? The story is complicated, yet revealing of the human desire to explain the world and how people can possibly engage it.

To this day, humanity struggles with these questions. Even as we want Barack Obama to be our savior and rescue us from our own dire circumstances, we are wanting someone or something outside ourselves to do the work. Conversely, we also need something or someone to blame, someone outside ourselves who is responsible for all that is wrong.

So it is we recall the 1970's Flip Wilson's TV show, and one of the main characters, Geraldine, who when confronted with some kind of bad behavior, would say the famous line, "The devil made me do it!" Once, when showing off a particularly gaudy and ugly dress, Geraldine declared "The devil made me buy this dress!"

Things aren't much different today. We are still blaming something outside ourselves when things go bad. The Devils throughout our history are as numerous as the Saviors: Antiochus and Nero and Caligula in ancient Greek and Roman times on to Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot in modern times. These Devils reside right alongside Jesus in days of old to Gandhi and Dr. King in modern times.

Along the way we still struggle with explanations of why things are the way they are.

Even as we really, really want a messiah to lead us to the Promised Land, we continue to wonder about the Devil. For instance, how did the Devil get away with the breathtaking evil of the 20th century with its wars and pogroms and concentration camps, with its use of poison gas on dissidents and its genocides and torture?

The very hard answer is the same as in the Savior sermon: all leaders get away with what they do because those who are being led *allow for, collaborate with, turn their eyes away*, or simply *do nothing*.

For we must accept the obvious truth that we all have the almost equal capacity between doing good and doing evil.

So what does that leave us with? The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, "The arc of the universe bends toward justice." Others have said that there is a titanic battle between good and evil, but good will always eventually win because it possesses 50.1% of the energy of the universe.

I personally believe this is a reason for religion to exist, for we are one of the few institutions which teach people that goodness is not only possible, but is our "sacred" responsibility to enact. The ancient Hebrew prophet Micah wrote: "What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

In the final analysis, this thing is all about *responsibility*. Not blame. Not somebody's fault. Not passing the buck, even when we think we know where the buck stops. It is about asking the question "In what way am I complicit in what's going on around me?"

For the inconvenient truth is that the only way that things happen is when I *allow* them to happen.

Of course, I can't be talking about hurricanes or earthquakes or other "natural" disasters (otherwise know as "acts of God"). But I am talking about the advent of someone like Adolph Hitler or something like Nazism, neither of which could have possibly happened except for the complicity and collaboration of the people. For instance, Hitler himself could never have carried out the nefarious

deeds of his regime; he relied on the participation of the German people, which according to historical records were more than happy to cooperate.

That's an extreme example for my argument. Perhaps a closer analogy would be how America went along with the criminal activities of the Bush administration. Now, after the fact, we rant and rave on how bad everything was during those eight years. But we conveniently forget that almost everything bad that happened, was *allowed for* by the American people, even to the extent that Congress (our representatives at the highest level of governance) voted in favor of these things such as the Patriot Act and even the war itself.

Non-compliance with government sponsored activity which we find abhorrent and immoral is never an easy thing to do. It always requires an act of bravery as well as monumental sacrifice. For instance, during the Vietnam War, many resisters who were of the age to be drafted, chose to defy the system by simply refusing to participate, first by burning their draft cards (a federal offense) and then by refusing to show up for induction. Their sacrifice caused much disruption and dismay in their lives—going to jail does that you know.

How can it be any other way? How can we not allow these immoral and incompetent leaders to get their way, except by not participating in their plans? Still, it's always a very large challenge which is fraught with unpleasant consequences.

What I am about to say will sound exceedingly harsh, but my reasoning is supported by the wisdom of all the great prophets and people of good will throughout human history. The decision to do what is right in my personal life and activity, no matter what the cost, is my only ticket into becoming a fully responsible human being. Yes, just as in my doctor's pronouncement to me in order to become healthy, it is my responsibility to do the right thing in all ways and in all circumstances, and there's simply no getting around that monumental fact.

I am talking about our sacred duty to participate in the creation of a just world, of a loving world, of a beautiful world.

As we move toward this magnificent mission, let us recall Frederick Douglas' words:

*Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground.*

*They want rain without thunder and lightning: they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters.*

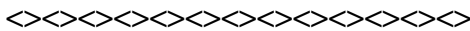
*Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.*

*Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them.*

*The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.*

May it be that we hear and pay heed to this great man's words—now and always.

Amen.



*Benediction:*

**“When I Cried for Help”** (—Mary Oliver, in her collection, *Red Bird*.)

Where are you, Angel of Mercy?  
Outside in the dusk, among the flowers?  
Leaning against the window or the door?  
Or waiting, half asleep, in the spare room?

I’m here, said the Angel of Mercy.  
I’m everywhere—in the garden, in the house,  
and everywhere else on earth—so much  
asking, so much to do. Hurry! *I need you.*

Imagine that! The Angel of Mercy needs us, for there is so much asking and so much to do.

So Be It.