

## The Lie

I get nervous when things go well for any period of time. Do you ever feel that? Experience teaches us that when everything's good, something will go wrong. Like when you make the last payment on your car—what happens? You start making payments on repairs.

Or when your job is really excellent. The work is challenging and rewarding, and you're enjoying your co-workers. Then something goes wrong, or somebody gets their tail in a knot and the whole workplace is filled with ominous tension. Murphy's law is inexorable. Life throws us curves.

Solomon attributed at least some of these twists to God: "When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future" (Ecclesiastes 7:14). In this broken world, God keeps us off balance to teach us dependence.

And sometimes, the enemy of our souls works to destroy good things that God is doing. Sometimes the life of an otherwise healthy church is disrupted by an incident of discontent or wrongdoing, and soon the whole place is in an uproar.

We are reminded again and again that in this present world there's something wrong with everything. It isn't heaven until it's heaven.

We have been working our way through the early chapters of the Book of Acts. It's our family album, the beginnings of the Christian story we find ourselves in today. In everything we've read so far, the church has enjoyed incredible prosperity, miraculous growth.

For instance, last week we examined the church's response to a threat of persecution. They took it to the Lord in prayer and spread it out before him. They said: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." When they got done, Luke tells us: "...the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:29-32).

Let's pick up the story in Acts 4:32-37.

Pretty spectacular stuff. These early Christ-followers were part of a rapidly exploding mega-church. They had superb leadership, and absolute solidarity of purpose and direction. There was a winsome openness as people gave freely to make sure everyone's needs were met. People held possessions with open hands and were always ready to give when needs arise.

As I read this, I thought of our dear sister Harriet Cooper who just went to be with the Lord. One of the stories we told at her funeral was about her generosity. One day she met a family at a gas station—complete strangers. They were on their way to Detroit when their car broke down. They were stuck.

Harriet loaned them her car on the spot. She said: "Bring it back when you're done."

Imagine a church filled with people like that! Some of the wealthier members even sold property and other possessions and brought it to the apostles for the common good.

There were others outside the church in that ancient culture who practiced a similar kind of generosity. For instance, the followers of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras had a saying, "Among friends everything is common."

And, there were the Essenes, a Jewish sect who lived in a desert commune known as

Qumran. They're the ones who preserved the documents we now know as the Dead Sea Scrolls. They required that anyone who joined their movement sell everything they owned and donate it to a common account.

What was happening in the early church, however, was very different. The followers of Pythagoras were generous with their friends, but their friends were upscale, social equals. They were generous with each other and they expected others to reciprocate, to be just as generous with them.

And among the Essenes, selling everything was *required* for membership. It wasn't voluntary.

In the church, people gave without thinking about a return. There was no expectation of reciprocity. And there was no demand—no rule requiring a common purse. They acted out of love and in response to need.

It's a glowing picture. This is the primitive church at it's best. No wonder we sometimes wish we could have been there. No wonder we wish our church could be just like that.

We haven't read the rest of the story. Things were going fantastically! But what happens when things are going well? Satan was skulking around the edges. Let's read what happened next: Acts 5:1-11.

Now do you wish you could be part of a church like this? What if God did now what he did then?

If Luke is giving us snapshots of the early church, we'd like to leave this one out of the family album. It's a troubling part of the story we find ourselves in.

What happened to Ananias and Sapphira is off the charts—off our charts anyway. Stories like this cause some even to reject the Christian faith. They can't believe in a church or a God who is so angry, so vindictive. A God of love would never treat people this way, right?

What Ananias and Sapphira did doesn't seem to be all that reprehensible. It's not like they killed someone, or were openly sexually immoral. They fudged on their generosity. They claimed to be giving all the proceeds of a sale when they were only giving some. They wanted a reputation for sacrificial generosity without paying the full price.

Peter says there was nothing wrong with only giving part of the money. It was their's to do with as they wished. What made it wrong was the deception, the lie. They agreed together to misrepresent the truth.

By lying to the church, they had lied to the Holy Spirit into whom the whole church had been immersed and by whom the church was indwelt. Later Paul would describe the church as a holy temple in which God dwells by his Spirit.

You see, this thing we call church is not merely a human institution. This gathering of people here this morning is not some kind of a holy club. We are body of Christ, a community of the Spirit, the Church of the living God, a holy temple in which God is present.

God looks at what we do in and to the church, how we respond to it, and our personal integrity toward it as something we do to God himself. That's why Peter would tell Ananias that he had not lied to men, but to God.

That doesn't make the church or it's leaders infallible. We aren't claiming some kind of divine immunity from error, or supreme authority to tell people what to do. It does however give us a clear glimpse of what God thinks of his church, how Jesus views his Bride.

Peter goes on to charge Sapphira with putting God to the test. Ananias and Sapphira thought they had a sweet secret deal between themselves. They hadn't reckoned with the fact that

God witnessed their lie. They thought God would not know or care. Peter said this was like daring God to act—they tested God.

In the counsel King David gave his son and heir, Solomon, David warned: “for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9). God knows. God sees.

Something else was at work here. Peter asked Ananias: “...how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit...?”

Back in Acts 4:31, Luke says that after the church had prayed, they were all *filled* with the Holy Spirit. They had asked for God’s enablement and opened their hearts to receive it.

By considering deception, Ananias and Sapphira opened their hearts to Satan and he filled them, just like the Holy Spirit fills us. Satan powerfully influenced their decisions and acts, encouraging and enabling them to do his will.

Sometimes we ask about whether or not Christians can be *possessed* by demons. The Bible never uses the term *possession*. But just as Christians can and should be filled by the Spirit, we can also be filled by Satan to do his will and accomplish his purposes.

Satan was trying to derail the early church. It was a subtle infection. A little fudging of the truth. We can pretend to be better than we are. We can hide our greed behind a show of obedience and generosity.

And remember, Ananias and Sapphira did do a good thing. They donated a significant sum of money. But the good they did masked the lie they told. And God saw. And God reacted.

Just as miracles are clustered around those times when God does something new, so are instances of immediate, divine judgement. For instance, after the Exodus, God gave Israel specific instructions about worship. Israel built the tabernacle according to God’s plan, and they ordained Aaron and his sons as priests, as God had said.

But almost immediately, two of Aaron’s sons thought they had a better idea. The text says: “Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command” (Leviticus 10:1).

What happened. The next verse tells us: “So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.”

Moses explained: “This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: ‘Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.’”

God didn’t immediately destroy every priest who dishonored him. Think of how long he put up with the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. They were carrying on with some of the women who served at the temple. They demanded the best cuts of the sacrificial animals before the people even had the chance to offer them. Hophni and Phinehas made Nadab and Abihu look like pikers.

So why did God act precipitously with Aaron’s sons, and not immediately with Eli’s?

God was revealing the standard on the front end. Nadab and Abihu got exactly what they deserved. It is only the patient mercy and grace of God that the any of us don’t immediately get exactly what we deserve. God was showing his people up front, at the very beginning, what he expected, and how serious he took sin and rebellion. He was giving us an example.

And that’s what’s happening in Acts 5. God demonstrated for all time what anyone deserves who lies to God, who tests God, who thinks they can get away with sin without God doing anything.

Further, God did not want Satan’s influence to infect his church. The church was in its

infancy and God was in charge of the nursery. He protected the holiness of his church.

But still we object: It's not fair! Nobody's perfect! A God of love wouldn't treat people that way!

When we say such things, we show ourselves to be shaped more by our culture and this world than by the truth of God. God *is* love—beyond our ability to comprehend. *And*, God *is* holy—terrifyingly holy. The two attributes of God co-exist perfectly. God is not a mix of isolated parts we assemble on our own. He exists in the comprehensive integrity of his being.

Notice the outcome in verse eleven: “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.”

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a warning to anyone who treats God's Church lightly, deceitfully, disrespectfully, with impunity. God has bound his identity and holiness up with the fortunes of rag-tag assemblies of used-to-be's like us. We're not perfect, but that's not the point. We're forgiven. We're in process. We're God's kids. And we are a temple in which God dwells by his Spirit. That's the true nature of the church. And when we sin against the church, God sees that as a sin against himself.

In his mercy and patience, God doesn't immediately treat us as our sins deserve. But make no mistake—Ananias and Sapphira demonstrate for us what our sins deserve.

It matters that we confess and forsake what we're trying to fake, trying to hide. We may be able to fool people, but “...the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts.” The writer of Hebrews adds: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:14).

God sees what people don't.

Which brings us to this: is there some secret sin you need to bring to God in repentance and confession this morning? Not a temptation you are fighting, but a sin to which you have yielded? Have you ever considered that Satan may have filled your heart to do this thing? Will you acknowledge your sin openly to God, asking for his mercy and grace, his pardon and forgiveness?

And then, would you be willing to tell one other person? The Bible commends the healing that comes from confessing our sins to each other.

Choose wisely. Pick someone whose godliness you trust; whose discretion you trust. Maybe you need to talk to one of the pastoral staff. Maybe you're already in an accountability relationship with some other believers. The power of secret sins is broken when their secret is told.

The Bible says if we judge ourselves, we will not come under judgement (1 Cor. 11:31). Let's take care of business this morning.