

# St. Joder and the Bell

by Ben Yoder

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*The records are scanty and the facts few. We don't know the date or place of his birth. We know nothing of his family or his education or the cause of his death. What we do know comes to us from Switzerland, from a time before Switzerland existed, when it was the torn edge of an empire slowly disintegrating under its own weight. The information we have starts with his name. It is recorded in several forms. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century Vulgate Latin of his day, his name was Theodorus. To the Franks and Burgundians, whose newly adopted Latin would in time become French, his name is recorded as Th—odule. And among the Germanic Alemanni tribesmen he was called Theoderic (pronounced thi-YO-der-ric), which they quickly shortened to just Joder (pronounced yo-der), and by that name he was most widely known in the Middle Ages. Eventually he would become St. Joder, but in his own lifetime people knew him simply as Bishop Joder. For this is one of the crucial facts we have: he was indeed a bishop, a leader of the Christian community that existed in the Pennine Alps, in the towns strung along the River Rhone as it carved its way between the mountains. We know his seat of office was in Octodurum, today's Martigny, but he also labored for many years upriver in the town of Sitten (in French, Sion, and Latin, Sedunum). It's a quiet place, a town gathered around two upthrust hillocks. The people of Sitten will tell you today that there aren't many facts known about their patron saint, but this has endured: "Bishops come and bishops go," they say, "but none was as faithful and loving and holy a man as St. Joder."*



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One fine spring morning St. Joder, as had been his habit all his long years, rose before dawn and hiked a short way into the mountains that towered on either side of the Rhone river valley to find a place to pray. There in the fresh air and soaring alpine majesty the old white haired man could feel the divine presence like nowhere else. His heart was troubled that morning because the work of rebuilding the church destroyed nearly 80 years before under Diocletian's persecution was going slowly. There seemed to be something that burdened the hearts of the people there, something that made the task of bricks and mortar harder than it should be, something that stunted and weakened the message of the faith he proclaimed. And so when he reached a particularly favorite meadow, it was with a heavy heart that he settled beside a boulder to pray. Just before he bowed his head he glanced around, and that's when he saw the Bell.

It was a stunning sight, to say the least, the most obvious reason being that, as one might expect, there aren't any bells high in the Alps on glorious spring days, or any other

days for that matter. To add to that, the Bell appeared to be hanging in the entrance to a small cave in the mountainside, a cave that St. Joder had never seen before even though he had prayed many times in this very place. And to top it all off, this was no ordinary bell. St. Joder had seen bells before, but those were crudely made of thin iron sheets beaten together, and carried in the hand, and this Bell—well, this Bell was magnificent: slightly taller than a grown man and made of radiant burnished brass glowing in the morning sun like the Trump of God itself. It didn't take a great deal of thought before St. Joder was on his feet to get a closer look.

The Voice didn't speak until he was within ten feet of the bell, and then the words went right through him like a cleansing wind, a wind that seemed to blow from the very presence of the Bell itself.

“My son, my son, remove your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground.”

This brought St. Joder to a complete halt, and without thinking he was kneeling and starting to unlace his shoes. Then he hesitated.

The Voice spoke again, and somehow the words seemed to speak with a father's smile. “No, no, my son, I am not constrained to burning bushes or the mouths of donkeys. It is true. Today I speak to you from this bell.”

St. Joder immediately bowed completely to the ground and removed his shoes as fast as he could get them off. With a voice made weak from the weight of the moment, he remembered the correct response. “Speak, Lord, for Thy servant listens.”

“Prepare yourself, for I have a task for you to do. Your path will end in a test like nothing else you have faced before. But when I give a task, I also give gifts. For you this day, I have the Gift of Hearing. Now, speak to the bell, my son, and command it to ring.”

St. Joder felt bewildered and hesitated.

“Speak! Command the bell to ring!” And the Voice had the weight of mountains in its dominion.

“I, uh, I command you, O Bell, to ring.” It was not exactly spoken in the most overpowering tone of authority, but it was audible. Give it that much.

Bong!

The sound reverberated down the mountains and across the valley, a golden sound that washed over the land like the waters of the Flood of Noah.

BONG!

The sound enveloped St. Joder and carried him on its curling wave. Light flooded his senses until he almost felt dissolved in it, liquefied and dispersed.

# BONG!

Warmth. Oh the warmth. It filled him to the depths and heights of him. It was love, pure, incandescent and vast. To the end of his days, he never forgot this moment when the world was right and perfect.

He almost cried when it ended. The world faded and returned to the dullness of a bright spring day. Except . . . except for an echo of warmth that settled—that settled around his ears. He frantically clasped his hands to the side of his head. His ears were the same. He could feel no difference. Yet—what was that?

He looked up. The clouds, great fleecy herds of them, were sprawled across the sky and *droned* in a sleepy, contented mumble born of moisture and sun as they migrated towards the horizon. He looked around him. The mountains were rumbling back and forth in deep grinding voices that went so low he felt them vibrating through the soles of his feet, muttering in tones of basalt and granite and magma that bubbled far below. He looked down. Down in the valley the river swirled a bright, clattering, chattering language, ever changing, ever varied, eternal riverstone language. The whole world talked and bawled and gossiped and murmured at the top of its lungs.

Then it faded. Not completely, but just to the edge of consciousness, like the sounds at the fringes of dreams, waiting.

“My son, go now. Be ready. I will call at a time you do not expect.”

The Bell was beginning to fade as well, turning thin and insubstantial.

He surged to his feet. “Lord, wait! Will I ever see you again?”

“When that which is broken mends, my voice will awaken and drive all foes to flight.”

St. Joder was left standing in an alpine meadow on a glorious spring day, staring at an empty cave. He stood for the longest time, and then bent to put on his shoes.



His life returned to normal, and that was a wearisome thing. Though he strained his ears, the world did not speak up, and it was back to the task of building and preaching and visiting and managing, until he began to wonder whether it had been some trick of wishing and bad digestion.

Through the swift alpine summer life went on until the grape harvest neared. That was when the disaster struck. Without warning the grape leaves turned black and fell from the vines, and the fruit wrinkled up and started to rot. In a land where wine is a

daily beverage due to its ability to not spoil, the winter was suddenly looming as a long, cold, thirsty time.

St. Joder was taking a walk through the market, where the townsmen were meeting to commiserate and prepare for the upcoming dearth. Perhaps no one would be starving, but the winter was always a hard time which a few didn't make it through, and the loss of the wine crop only made it worse. The people were standing and talking between the stalls. His ears for no apparent reason suddenly began to feel warm.

“Over here, bishop!”

The old man stopped and looked around to see who had called him. No one in the market paid any attention to him. He started to continue on.

“We said over here, bishop! Don't walk by and ignore us!”

He stopped immediately and carefully looked the crowd over to see who it was. Perhaps someone was smiling, pulling a prank. No one seemed to be a likely candidate. But who would be calling him, and in a voice so dry and scratchy? It sounded like someone who had been left in a parched desert for far too long.

“Down here, bishop! On the table!”

The old man glanced down to see someone had laid down a large bunch of withered and half rotted red grapes on the table next to him.

“That's right! It's us! Pick us up. We have something to say.”

St. Joder reached for the bunch, then looked up and muttered to himself, “Mountains and rivers and clouds are one thing, but *spoiled grapes*? Is a man of my age to be listening to *grapes*?”

“Well, it doesn't have to be beams of light and angels with flaming swords every time, now does it? Just hold us close to your ear because all this shouting has almost worn us out, and we can't keep it up much longer.”

Feeling more than a bit foolish, St. Joder lifted the bunch and held it close to his right ear. The people nearest him in the marketplace caught sight of what he was doing and paused their conversations to watch. The bishop was a well-known and respected man, but this was unlike anything he had ever done. A widening pool of silence surrounded him as the old man held the bunch to his ear and nodded several times. Finally he put down the bunch and looked at the townspeople gaping at him.

“People of Sitten, listen to me! God has heard your cries! Bring to me every empty wine jar and vat and barrel you own. Every cask and flagon and jug and keg! Let nothing be left out. Bring them here to the marketplace now.”

At first people took it as too fantastic to be obeyed, but then one woman rushed from her home with a wine jar, and then someone else did too, and that seemed to break the dam. Within a short time, several hundred vessels were lined up, every one empty and waiting.

St. Joder walked down the rows of vessels, and in each one he placed a dry and withered grape plucked from the bunch in his hand. When that ran out, he got another and continued until every single one from chest high barrels to small, plain earthen jars had a grape in it. He then stretched his arms out and prayed a short prayer.

Nothing happened.

St. Joder took a firm grip on his rising feeling of panic. The Lord wouldn't have led him this far to abandon him. He turned to look at the gathered faces. He saw the people, the ones he had preached to and persuaded and reasoned with, the ones that had seemed so stubborn and resistant to the message he brought, the ones that had almost worn him out with their silent rejection, and they were right there, waiting, their eyes and ears open, half expectant, half resistant. His heart swelled with the words he wanted to say.

“People, the Lord spoke of having faith as small as a mustard seed, or perhaps it might be as small as a—withered grape.” And he was off and running. The words flowed from him like a stream in spring. He talked of the mustard tree growing from the tiny seed, and then moved to the Lord supplying miraculous wine at the wedding feast of Cana, and was winding up with the five loaves and two fishes feeding the five thousand when a collective gasp from the crowd interrupted him. He glanced down. Every single vessel was filled to the brim with rich, deep red wine, sparkling in the sun. His heart leaped inside him. He picked up a small cup near him and held it to his lips for a sip. The slow smile on his face told the whole story, and then he handed it to whoever was nearest. A buzz of excitement and then plain joy erupted from the crowd. And the following Sunday, there was a different mood at church.

No one ever forgot that day. For centuries to come, people would remember the day God restored the wine harvest with the best vintage anyone had ever known. St. Joder kept a small barrel for himself in the small quarters he had next to the church he was rebuilding, on the crest of one of the two hillocks. He was always generous with it, freely sharing cups of the wine with friends and travelers and beggars, whoever he met. “Here,” he would say, “this will cheer your heart and give you strength.” And people would walk away with a new sense of confidence and hope, a sparkle in their eye, ready to go on. As long as St. Joder lived, that barrel never ran dry, but always had more to share. When people asked him how he had known to do what he did that day, he would smile and reply, “Let's just say it doesn't always take beams of light and angels with flaming swords. Sometimes you just have to listen.”



The cup smashed into the flagstones.

“Who vomited up that foul fluid?” The tinker gave St. Joder a blistering scowl. “What are trying to do, poison me?”

St. Joder was shocked into speechlessness. In the four years he had been giving people cups of wine from his barrel, no one had ever reacted like this. The tinker at his doorstep had looked grateful when he offered the wine. Then he had taken one small sip.

The bishop found his voice. “My good man, as God is my witness, I was offering you the best I had in my home. I, I cannot explain what would make you feel this way.”

“Anyone would feel the way I do if someone offered them that wretched slop! It tasted like something scooped out of an open sewer.” The man stood there for a minute, glaring at the bishop, as if daring him to contradict what he’d said.

In the midst of his confusion, something began to tug at his attention. It almost felt like an itching in his ears.

“It burned and burned all the way down! It was like swallowing molten rock!” exclaimed a voice that was like the bellowing of a bull shaped into words.

“No, no, you idiot! It was like sucking snake venom!” said a different voice, one that sounded deep and oddly grating on the nerves.

“Whatever it was, it almost killed us. Now shut your mouths and wait.” This one was high and thin and seemed to slither.

St. Joder stared at the man in horror. It didn’t take much for him to conclude what he was hearing—the man was possessed. There was one thing in all his long life that he had never faced, and that was demonic powers. He felt little desire to begin now.

“Please, Lord,” he prayed silently to himself, “please, not that. Should a man of my age have to do this? Please, send someone else. Let this man go on his way.”

Deep in his heart, St. Joder could feel an urging, a wordless command to confront what he was hearing, and not to flee. The scene flashed across his mind of the Apostle Paul facing the demon possessed girl at Philippi. With a blink and a deep feeling of misgiving, he knew what he had to do.

The old man reached out his hand, only slightly trembling, and spoke to the angry man on his doorstep.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of him!”

That was all it took. The man immediately fell onto his back and began to writhe and scream. Three times a terrific convulsion shook him, accompanied by shrieking and

half strangled words of anger and hatred, but in the end the man was lying quietly on his back.

St. Joder knelt beside the man and touched his shoulder. He looked into the man's eyes.

The man stared back, at first too stunned to speak, and then his face crumpled into tears. Racking sobs burst out, followed by words of thanks. St. Joder helped him sit up and held him in an embrace until the sobs subsided, then got him to his feet and through the door into his home.

The man was later able to tell his story of how for years he had carried the demons inside him. They had forced him to do hideous things, until he had lost his family, his village and trade, and could only wander from place to place eking out a living as a tinker. There were many tears. St. Joder wrote a letter to the elder of the congregation near the man's village, telling what had happened and asking him to assist the man in putting the pieces of his life back together. There were more tears at this, but near the end the man accepted another cup of St. Joder's wine, and this time it had the usual effect. The man left, smiling and waving over his shoulder.

"Oh Lord," St. Joder prayed as he waved back, "thank you for getting me through this, but I ask you to not make me deal with this kind of thing again." He closed his door, but just before it was tight he heard a dark mutter, like a shadow flitting across his heart.



Several days later, St. Joder was hurrying home late in the evening, anxious to be indoors before the daylight failed. He came to the main bridge over the river Rhone and was at the crest when the world began to speak again, but this time in a different tone of voice. The river began chattering in its way while the stones of the bridge and the boulders in the river below vibrated their slow thoughts, but all of their speech was thick and clotted, filled with deep-seated rage and disgust, like someone forced to wade chest deep in sewage, like someone witnessing a crime and not able to do a thing about it. The force of it almost made him stumble. He stopped and looked around, and that's when he spotted them. Crouched on three boulders in the middle of the river below were three dark, hideous forms, like misshapen beasts. He could almost see the river trying to curl away from touching them, the boulders shifting and trying to be free of their foul weight.

"Are our forces ready to strike, Abbraxas?" The voice was familiar, like an animal grunting and bellowing human speech.

"Yes, yes, for the tenth time, yes, you idiotic lump of muscle. Azazel, strike Buer again until he learns to listen." This voice was high and thin.

There followed some thumping and snarling and jumping from rock to rock until the forms were at rest again.

“I just want to hear the good news, Abbraxas!” said the animal voice.

“You will hear it, imbecile. How will we not hear it? Every Servant on earth and below will roar with pleasure when the knife strikes our great enemy.”

A deep and grating voice like heavy claws dragged across a slate spoke up. “Sweet blood! Sweet pain! I can almost smell it now. And then? What about us? Will we have our revenge on the simpleton who cast us from our mount? I want to squeeze him till his heart pops!”

“On that, we will have to await word from Down Below. I too hunger for it, Azazel. It may be years until we get a new mount, years of waiting in the shadows. We owe it all to you, Buer, you cretin! Strike him again, Azazel!”

There was more howling and flailing.

“Mercy, Abbraxas! Mercy! I could not stand that vile concoction our mount had swallowed.”

“Neither could Azazel or I, but did we relax our grip? No, it was you! You, you oaf! If you cannot help keep the mount pinched tighter, then I shall recommend to Lord Adramalech that you be given an earthworm next. Perhaps then you will learn to ride your mount with proper control.”

“Mercy, Abbraxas, mercy! I swear by the Lake of Fire it will not happen again. I beg of you not to say anything to Lord Adramalech. I will be a Servant crouched at your feet, learning from your glory all the craft I can contain, serving you until the end of time itself.”

“Silence! I grow weary of the sound of your voice. Let us be away now. Loss of a mount doesn’t mean loss of discipline, and we have much more patrolling yet to do. Perhaps some small crumb of success can follow our noisome defeat.”

With that the three forms melted away and St. Joder was left standing on the bridge with his stomach churning and his mouth dry.



That night St. Joder lay in his bed, tossing and turning, unable to sleep. He almost wished he hadn’t received the Gift of Hearing. What action was being planned? Who was the great enemy? What might they do to *him* in revenge for the loss of the tinker? These thoughts chased each other around and around until sleep was hounded far away. At last he got up and opened his window, hoping some air might clear his mind. The peaceful village lay spread out around the hillocks, illuminated by a full moon.

The large horned owl landed with a muffled whoosh on the ledge, startling the old man. “Don’t be afraid, Theodorus,” the owl said, after the bishop had regained his



composure, “but listen carefully. I bring an important word. Tonight someone seeks to take the life of the Bishop of Rome.”

“Damasus? Someone wants to kill him?”

“You must warn him, Theodorus. The assassin wears a goat’s head amulet and walks with a limp. Warn Damasus!” And then the owl was off in a flurry of wings.

“Wait! Rome? How will I get there?” But it was too late. St. Joder was left in turmoil. Damasus . . . the man who had risen high to hold the see of Peter himself, had become the most honored and respected bishop in the empire, and some said the true leader of all Christians everywhere. And one of St. Joder’s oldest friends. The thought of someone trying to take Damasus’s life almost made him ill. And it would take weeks of travel to get there. How could he ever reach the city tonight? St. Joder sat down on his bed, his head in his hands.

“Lord, if you wish me to do this, if that is why you sent word to me, then provide me with a way, if that is your will.”

Three harsh voices sounded faintly through his window. Coming to his feet again, St. Joder peered out into the moonlight. There, around the side of the hillock his home and the slowly rebuilding church occupied were three dark forms bounding and flying and bouncing from tree to rock to ground. As before, they appeared to be spending as much time arguing and attacking each other as they did cooperating. Their presence suddenly filled St. Joder with rage.

“How dare this abominable spawn befoul my town! Have I not done everything I can think of to lead people into light? And now these denizens of hell think they can ruin everything I’ve worked for!”

A thought flashed across his mind. It made him turn pale. It was mad, some might say, but it had a chance of getting him to Rome *and* ridding Sitten of the demons, although the risks would be horrifying. “Is there an open door here?” he whispered to himself. “If so, may I have the strength to grip it with both hands.”

Before he could lose his nerve, he leaned out of his window and called out, “Foul minions of darkness, come to me here, if you dare!”

Their kind could not resist such words, eager as they are to advance in rank and reluctant to show any sign of fear before others of their kind. They also harbored a violent hatred toward the old man that pulled them in as well. Instantly the three gathered at his window, crouched at the casement, reeking a fetid odor of equal parts rotting meat and heated dung. “Speak, old fool, and don’t waste our time,” said the smallest of the three.

“I have a task for you to do. Which of you is the fastest?”

“That would be me,” said the tallest of the three, clapping together immense bat-like wings. The spirit had the feet of a monstrous bird, but the head of a hairless goat, while his body was covered with what looked like open sores. St. Joder knew his voice: harsh and discordant, a pain to the ears. “I am Azazel, and I travel swifter than grief.”

“And which of you is the strongest?”

The broadest had been squatting like a toad. “I am,” he said, and St. Joder recognized this voice too—an animal’s bellowing. He straightened up. His limbs were as thick as tree trunks and dense with coiling muscle. Glistening black scales were everywhere. He opened his wide, lipless mouth and a tongue as long as a python twirled about before being pulled back in. “Buer is stronger than a minotaur.”

“And which of you is the smartest?”

“That is me, beyond all doubt,” said the smallest, pushing between the two on either side. It was pale, like a stillborn infant that never saw the sun, and stood the size of a boy. Its skull was grotesquely swollen to three times normal size, and its small, squinting eyes glinted with malice. “I am Abbraxas, the commander of these two, and only Lord Amon is craftier than I.” This one had the high, slithering voice. “What do you propose?”

“Azazel must carry me to Rome and back. Buer may assist if Azazel so chooses. You, Abbraxas, will wait here. If you bring me back after the rooster crows, then all three of you must leave Sitten and never return.”

“And if we return before the rooster crows?” Abbraxas asked. “What will you offer us that will entice us into this bargain?”

St. Joder paused for just a second, and desperately searched his mind for an alternative, but there was only one thing he knew of that would motivate them. “You may have me for your new mount, and my soul upon my death.”

All three roared with pleasure.

“I can taste your soul already, senile fool,” crowed Abbraxas. “But what’s this about roosters? How do I know you won’t betray us with some hidden trick?”

“That’s why you will stay here. I will get my rooster and you get yours. Both will be in your keeping. You can personally make sure I do nothing to unfairly influence either one. Both must crow together to end the deal. So what is your answer?”

Abbraxas’s eyes glittered. “You will not believe what I will make you do once we take possession of your body. Yes, it’s a deal, but—if you try anything, if you deliberately drag your heels or purposely cheat in any way, then we get your soul, no questions asked. So what is *your* answer?”

“Cheat? Isn’t that more a specialty of your kind? *I* propose that if you try to cut my journey short without accomplishing its goal or returning me here, then you will leave Sitten forever, whether we are back in time or not, understood?”

“Perfectly. Now go get your rooster.”

St. Joder ran to gather up sleeping King David, his fine white rooster. Abbraxas disappeared to reappear moments later with a skeletal bird that retained only a few straggling black feathers and smelled of rotting flesh. It stirred briefly in his hands. Both birds, sleepy but awake, were placed on the town wall near the northwest tower, with Abbraxas watching from a short distance.

Azazel knelt before St. Joder. “Now, human, sit on my back and don’t fall off.”

Even though the demon’s open sores made the old man’s skin crawl, he carefully seated himself on the thing’s shoulders, careful not to touch anywhere with his bare hands, and they were off into the night. Under other circumstances, the trip would have been the glory of a lifetime, but as it was he barely noticed as they soared high above the Alps and then down the length of Italy. Long before he expected the trip to end, they had landed outside the large villa on the outskirts of Rome where Pope Damasus lived.

“Be quick about your business, old fool. If I think you’re playing a trick, I will mount you *immediately*, whether the others are present or not.” Azazel smiled most unpleasantly.

“Just wait here. I won’t be long.” St. Joder hurried into the building.

It didn’t take long for St. Joder to rouse the entire household. Soon dozens of servants, guards and underlings were rushing about. Finally Damasus himself, in a richly ornamented, though hastily donned, robe was ushered in. He seated himself in a large, elaborately carved chair, a man in his early seventies with a long, full beard, a sizeable paunch, and heavy bags under his eyes.

“My old friend, Theodorus, this is quite a surprise. Sit here beside me.” For all his years, his voice had not lost its rich, deep baritone. A hand heavy with rings patted a bench beside him. St. Joder took the seat. “Now, what brings you here so suddenly in the middle of the night?”

“I cannot stay long, Blessed Damasus, so I will be brief. Is there anyone in your household who limps?”

Damasus’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, yes, as a matter of fact, there is.” Every eye in the room turned toward a guard officer. “My captain, Marcus Juventus here, has limped since my struggle with Ursinus all those years--”

Before he could finish his sentence, the man ripped his dagger from its scabbard and threw himself at the pontiff, screaming curses. He landed at the feet of Damasus, only to be overpowered and subdued by guards and servants. When the confusion and

shouting finally settled down, and the visibly shaken Damasus had composed himself, St. Joder continued.

“If there is any doubt of this man’s mission, check beneath his tunic. You will find he is wearing a goat head amulet.” A quick look revealed this, causing the man to scream once more and thrash in the grip of the men holding him, and the servants and underlings to mutter and give St. Joder long, dark looks.

“I was warned of this by a miraculous messenger, and only tonight was I able to reach you with word of it.”

The servants and underlings began to talk loudly until Damasus stood up and commanded the captain to be dragged away and tied up, then dismissed everyone back to their beds.

“Theodorus, come with me.”

They walked down a corridor lined with murals and marble busts. Mosaics depicting the miracles of Christ covered the floor. “My heart is still pounding from what just happened back there, Theodorus. I need a breath of fresh air to calm my nerves.” They walked out into a portico leading to one of the gardens.

“How many years has it been, old friend?”

“Since I saw you last? It’s been a good ten years or more, perhaps when you consecrated me as bishop.”

“No, no, since we were catechumens together.”

“Oh—well, then it’s been forty five years, at least.”

“That long? Truly? That’s what marks us as old, isn’t it? The long ago is clearer than yesterday. I can still smell the ink and vellum of the books at the scriptorium. I remember walking and laughing and debating with you, Theodorus. And riddling. Do you still like to ask riddles?”

A smile touched St. Joder’s face. “Yes, once in a great while, and every time I do so I think of you. What was that one you made up about David? You could think them up faster than I, but mine were harder.”

“Harder? I think not!” They both laughed. “Well, be that as it may, here I have another riddle. An old friend shows up suddenly and saves my life. How is it again that you got here?”

“Damasus, suffice it to say that the Lord sent a messenger to warn me. I wouldn’t have believed anything else—and I would have had no other way to know.”

“Hmmm, I guess not. It’s a bit much to assume an enemy would just happen to tell a bishop out in—where are you, in Rhaetia?”

“Alpes Poeninae. The town of Sedunum.”

“Yes, a small place, near the heathen Allemanni as I recall. Are you happy there, out at the edge like that?”

“The work is hard, my friend, but I am content.”

“And this messenger from the Lord, he wasn’t a mutual acquaintance of ours, was he?”

“Not at all. He was, shall we say, a wise old bird, but no one I had ever met before.”

“And your journey here?”

“Aided by some recent, er, acquaintances, who have been—um, gracious—enough to let me travel with them. The message left me no time to wait for sunrise and my acquaintances leave me little time to linger here in your home.” He folded his arms and gave him a small smile.

Damasus shot him a wary look. “That’s it?”

“Yes, Damasus, old friend, that’s it. For the sake of our friendship, I ask you to trust me when I do not describe more.”

“I can see there’s more to this riddle than I will solve tonight. Well, be that as it may, I am deeply in your debt. I would like to properly thank you. . .”

St. Joder laid a hand on his friend’s arm. “Damasus, I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“Not possible? What are you talking of?” His eyebrows shot up, then drew together. “What do you say to a banquet? I’ll have you know I have the most wonderful cooks in all Rome. One little Thracian in my employ makes the most delicate honey cakes between here and Armenia.” He gave St. Joder a merry look. “And I’m well known among all the patrician families for my post-dinner entertainment.”

“Regretfully, no, Damasus, but thank you anyway.”

The pair walked through the gardens. From somewhere St. Joder could hear splashing water, and the scent of night blooming lilies came to him.

“Then what about a triumph down the streets of Rome? The City isn’t what it was in times past, but I think you’ll find the crowds are still large. We’ll do it in my own chariot, with a team of six matched horses. What do you say?”

“That sounds . . . impressive, but I can’t.”

“Perhaps something a little less carnal and a bit more spiritual? What about a liturgy of thanks at the basilica? You’ll love the changes I’ve instituted—we use our own Latin, now that so few people speak Greek anymore. I’ve added so much more color, with gold and silver vessels gleaming everywhere, sweet incense in thick clouds, good beeswax candles bright and numerous, vestments in a riot of colors and brass bells in every size and pitch.”

“That also sounds quite . . . impressive, but no. I’m sorry.”

“Theodorus, you are making it difficult for me to say thank you.”

“Then just say it, and that will be more than sufficient.”

“But I’m not someone who does things by half measure, *and*, I might add, I’m not used to people resisting the thanks of the Bishop of Rome, who occupies the Holy and Apostolic See of the Fisherman himself, and holds the keys of death and Hades. And especially not by bishops from obscure provinces.” His narrowed his eyes and gave him a sharp look.

St. Joder looked back and took a deep breath. “As much as I respect who you are and what you’ve done here, Blessed Damasus, I am just a humble man from a small town, too old for all that sort of thing. And I have something that demands I leave soon. I truly, truly can’t stay a moment longer than--”

They had reached the opposite side of the garden and there in an alcove it was before him—a bell. As tall as a grown man and made of burnished brass glowing as bright as the Trump of God itself. It stood on a small wooden base.

“Theodorus—a moment longer than . . . what?”

St. Joder ignored him and approached the bell, pausing for a moment, and then coming close enough to gently reach out and stroke the bell’s surface. A memory of a high alpine meadow filled him. “Speak, Lord, for Thy servant listens,” he muttered to himself. As if waking from a dream, he realized Damasus was at his side.

“Beautiful, isn’t it, Theodorus? Paulinus, bishop of Nola, had that made for me.” He paused and looked carefully at St. Joder. “I can see it truly has captured your heart like nothing else can. Well, that settles it. It’s yours.”

That snapped St. Joder’s attention back to the Pope.

“Damasus, I, I couldn’t. . .”

“Nonsense. I’m getting very tired of hearing that. If you can’t accept a gift of love, a gift of gratitude, for all the years of your faithful service, for your friendship, then something is severely wrong.”

“Damasus, what will I do with it?”

“Do with it? Do with it? Why, build a tower for it on that church you’re working on and put it at the top. Use it to call the faithful to prayer. Announce births, deaths and weddings. Warn of approaching enemies. And—I have specially blessed it. Its voice will drive away whatever evil lurks nearby.”

At these words, all reservations in St. Joder’s mind evaporated. He knew at a deep-down level that it was right to be here and to take this work of beauty home.

“All right then. I accept your gift.”

“Wonderful, wonderful! I’ll have my people arrange for a cart tomorrow.”

“That won’t be necessary. My, er, people are already able to get it back.”

Damasus looked at him from under bushy brows knit close together. “Old friend, are you *sure* there isn’t more to this riddle you’d like to tell me?”

“My companions are—very special, and someday, God willing, I’ll tell you all about how I came to be here tonight, but for now let’s just say they are a little shy and not exactly the social kind. Let me go find wherever they are and I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

After one more long look, the pope agreed to let it go at that. He embraced St. Joder and wished him a good trip home. They chatted a bit as people do before leave-taking, and then the old pontiff said a final good-bye and walked, somewhat sleepily, back to his bed.

With a flap of powerful wings, Azazel landed beside the bishop. “Finished, old fool? We have a journey ahead of us and no time to waste.”

“Quite finished. But you’ll be carrying both me and *that*.” He pointed to the bell.

“What? WHAT? Do you expect me to be your beast of burden? What do you think I am, a donkey for you to load up and beat with a stick? I refuse!”

“Is this too much for you to carry? I didn’t realize just how fragile you demons are. I’m so sorry.”

“I am a Servant of the Eighth Degree, in the Second Cohort of Lord Adramalech, and was there when the High Lord Himself sang with the morning stars, and I am not *fragile*! But I will not be subjected to this indignity!”

“I see. Well then, I agree. You should never be so grossly dishonored. I’ll just have to make arrangements with Pope Damasus in the morning for transportation of the bell. Of course, you’ll need to explain to Abbraxas why you didn’t return with me in

time—it being such a humiliation and all. I’m sure he’ll be very understanding and supportive.”

The demon shook his fists at the night sky and vented a roar of pure rage. “Oh little speck of dung that you are, I shall so enjoy making your final days ones of vilest torment.”

With that he sprang to the bell and picked it up by the cross beam it was hung from and hoisted it over his head in one smooth motion. “Get ready to ride, withered morsel. Your agony will be savored for centuries to come.”

The demon began to tuck the bell under his arm, but immediately yanked it away, hissing in pain. “The accursed thing burns! No matter! Climb on my back—quickly!”

St. Joder once again gingerly sat astride the devil’s shoulders. The creature launched himself into the air, grasping the bell once more by the wooden cross beam, and lurched heavily aloft, hauling it beneath him. The immense bat wings labored mightily until the Pope’s home had dwindled away far below. The journey down had been a swift flight, but the return was much slower. The demon’s wings beat, his lungs pumped like bellows, his whole body shuddered with the effort, but slowly they lost altitude and speed. It was when they neared the Alps, and St. Joder and Azazel looked up at the towering peaks with their snow-covered summits, that both knew it was beyond the demon’s strength. At last they dropped to the earth.

“You did the best you. . .”

“Shut your mouth, mortal. This is not ended.”

The demon stood, lifted his hands to his mouth and let loose a cry that was half scream and half roar. It went on and on for a minute or more until Azazel broke it off abruptly and cocked his head to one side.

“Good. He comes.”

They waited some time, long enough for St. Joder to begin to doze, when he was woken by rhythmic impacts jolting through the earth. They culminated in one final smash and there in front of them stood a black figure with arms and legs like tree trunks.

“I come. I COME!”

Barely able to stand any longer, Azazel wearily pointed at the bishop and his bell. “Take them both, Buer.”

The demon picked up the bell, and even though they caused a sizzle and a smoking when it touched his scales, he showed no signs of pain but turned it upside and wrapped his arms around it.

“Get in, human.”



“What?”

Without further word, Buer picked up the bishop by the nape of his neck and placed him inside the bell.

“Get in and stay in.”

With that, he bounded high into the air. The ensuing journey was one of soaring leaps that seemed to last forever, punctuated by bone jarring shocks as they returned to earth. St. Joder had to clutch the clapper to keep from being thrown out. The mountains didn't seem to slow the demon at all, but he just kept bounding over snowfields and boulders and ridges. It seemed to take forever, but in a shorter time than St. Joder realized, they came vaulting down the pass and into the valley of the Rhone. Just as there was beginning a hint of a pre-dawn flush to the east, the old man caught sight of the twin hillocks of home. He almost stopped breathing as his heart turned to lead. It would be very close.

“I COME! I COME!” Buer roared as he leaped one last time to cross the city walls, just barely high enough to make it. The dawn was on the verge of breaking over the horizon.

St. Joder frantically looked for the two roosters perched just below him on the northwest tower. There was Abbraxas with his arms around both, his fists clutched tightly around their heads. “Crow, King David, crow my little warrior!” he called out.

Without warning time froze.

The absolute silence and crystalline clarity of a world locked tight shocked the bishop. He stood in the upside down bell and looked about him in the eerie hush. Suddenly hovering in front of him was Abbraxas, holding the roosters under his arms and keeping their beaks tightly pinched between his fingers.

“You didn't think you were going to get away that easily, now did you, you feeble witted old failure? Did you think Abbraxas was just going to sit here and buff his nails while you gallivanted around Italy? Absolutely not! I'm a Servant of the Third Echelon and a protégé of Lord Moloch himself. If you're going to win this little wager, then you'll have to get by me first. I challenge you to a duel of wits! I don't think you can even go one round with me, but let's say the first one of us who can't answer the other's challenge is the loser. What do you say to that?”

“Why should I endure any further contest when it was never agreed to in the first place?”

“Just think of it as fair for fair for that little stunt with the bell. And don't think I'm going to release my hold on these birds' beaks any time soon. If you don't agree, well, I'll so enjoy making you perform the most perverse and cruel acts I can

conceive of, and I can conceive of *many*, and then we'll have an eternity to think over what fun we had. So suit yourself, old cretin."

"All right, unclean spirit, I agree to your contest. Same stakes as before?"

"But of course. And I will start—of course. Answer this if you dare:

*I'll die soon  
If I'm not soon fed,  
The hands I lick  
Will soon turn red.  
What am I?*

"You don't have a chance, dim-witted worm!"

Now St. Joder was accustomed to this kind of thing. He and Damasus had excelled in creating and solving these puzzles when they were young, and he had continued to delight in them throughout his life, asking them in gatherings of townsfolk through the long, cold winters. This one he hadn't heard before, so he began turning it over and over in his mind, mentally looking at it from every possible angle. He began to think of every animal he knew that might fit the description, but he also knew misdirection was the key—it might sound like an animal, but it was probably something else. Luckily, it didn't take long for him to deduce the answer.

"Did you think this one would truly stump me? You no doubt thought of this one because it's a thing you will be spending a lot of time around, when your master and you are consigned to the Lake of—Fire. The answer is fire."

Abbraxas growled deep in his throat. "Don't get so cocky, prune. That was a quick one to get us going, but I've got lots more to go. Now you ask one."

St. Joder thought for a bit, then started:

*When I'm still a baby, I lie sweet in the sun.  
When I'm in my middle years, I make you light hearted.  
When I grow old, I'm more valuable than I ever was.  
Who am I?*

"That's another quick one to get us going."

St. Joder hadn't realized that these metaphors were harder than they looked when the creature answering was steeped in hatred, malevolence and terror. Abbraxas had to ponder so long St. Joder began to hope he'd get out of this contest sooner than he expected. But before he said anything, the answer came to the demon's mind.

"What else other than what you sots use to blot out your pain? The answer is wine."

St. Joder conceded that was the answer and prepared himself for the demon's next try.

“Let's try something a little more challenging then:”

*Torn out of my mother's dark womb,  
Burned in a fire and beaten many times,  
I've become a killer, hungry for meat and blood.  
What am I?*

“Not exactly lying sweet in the sun, is it? Try that one!”

St. Joder struggled with it. The puzzle seemed like something a demon's warped mind would think of. He thought of all the people he'd met in his lifetime who might fit that description—soldiers and thieves and professional torturers. But he knew it wasn't the obvious. It was more likely to be an object personified. Then what objects are killers? He thought about it and thought about it until Abbraxas began to stir and rub his hands together, as if anticipating a win. At last, the old man answered.

“I have it. I think it was the ‘burned’ and ‘beaten’ part that helped me. The beaten and burned killers among us are the weapons we make at the forge. The answer is iron.”

Abbraxas seethed in discontent at this correct answer, but had to wait for St. Joder's next one.

St. Joder took a deep breath.

*I live three lives.  
I'm light enough to embrace the heavens,  
I'm gentle enough to soothe a baby's skin,  
I'm harsh enough to split stones.  
Who am I?*

This one stymied Abbraxas. The concept of gentleness and harshness combined was hard, and the triune nature of this one made him think of the Great Enemy, which he shied away from. It was only after much effort that he hit on the answer.

“You thought you had me stumped, but not this time. What exists in three forms? It's ice, steam and—water. The answer is water.”

St. Joder acknowledged that was the correct answer.

“Now that last one got me angry,” the demon continued, “so I'm going to give you one that I've been saving for a very long time. It's one of my favorites:”

*Then all thy feculent majesty recalls  
The nauseous mustiness of forsaken bowers,  
The leprous nudity of deserted halls --*

*The positive nastiness of sullied flowers.  
And I mark the colors, yellow and black,  
That fresco thy lithe, dictatorial thighs.*

St. Joder could feel sweat gathering under his arms. He didn't have a clue what this one was. To gain time, he asked the demon to repeat it several more times, which he did with increasing surliness and speed. Abbraxas sensed St. Joder's discomfort.

“What's the matter? Did your head crack and the brains leak out? You're cracking all right, you miserable wretch, like an egg under a boot. You know what we're going to do to you first after all three of us mount you? We're going to destroy you in front of your own people. Maybe we'll make you drown a child during baptism. Wouldn't that be a hoot? We'll have you thieving and philandering and embezzling until your own congregation vomits you out. And then we're just getting started. Oh my, oh my, are we going to have fun with you.”

During Abbraxas's tirade, St. Joder had begun praying under his breath. “Lord, give me a sign. Help me somehow. Anything! I'm in need of your help.”

Responding to a wordless inner prompting, he looked to his right. The only thing he could make out was a cobweb along the edge of the wall. He stared at it for a few seconds while Abbraxas spewed more venom. Nothing else came to the bishop.

“That's it, Lord?” he prayed. “A *cobweb*? What use is that?”

Then a memory came to him of walking the road from Sitten to Geneva many years before and seeing a large spider web suspended between two bushes, and spotting a large spider at the center with—black and yellow legs!

“And I mark the colors, yellow and black, that fresco thy lithe, dictatorial thighs,” he whispered to himself. Aloud, he shouted, “It's a spider! A *spider*, you vile travesty!”

Abbraxas took considerable time to cool down, but at last he was calm and coherent enough to listen. And that was fortunate for St. Joder because he was in need of a hard one, and nothing was coming to mind. As he was staring at Abbraxas and racking his mind, his white rooster began to stir in the demon's hands. The sight of the rooster brought back to St. Joder's mind one of the earliest puzzles he had ever been asked, from his boyhood when he was learning to spell and count.

“Since that last one was so special to you,” St. Joder said, “I have one that I remember from long ago:

*Five hundred begins it, five hundred ends it,  
Five in the middle is seen;  
The first of all letters, first of all numbers  
Take up their stations between.  
Join all together, and then you will bring  
Before you the name of an eminent king.*

Surely someone as wise as Lord Amon can figure this one out, can't he?"

Abbraxas screwed up his face, paced back and forth (the roosters still firmly in his grip), and muttered and cursed. The volume and pace picked up as time trickled by.

"I'll give you a good long time, but at some point you've got to answer."

The demon was getting more and more frantic, trying to cudgel his wits into producing the answer. The pacing turned into goose stepping and stomping and finally leaping in one spot.

"No, no, no! I can get this one! No way is that puny, frail, ignorant little *human* going to stump me. I demand three guesses! Three guesses!"

St. Joder sighed. "There wasn't anything said about three guesses, but all right, guess away."

"A map."

"Nope."

"A carved inscription."

"Sorry."

They were down to the demon's last guess. He began to hiss like a nest of fifty cobras. He scowled till he almost cracked the rock in front of him.

"King Solomon!"

"Wrong again!" Relief washed over St. Joder's heart like a river at flood stage. He knelt inside the bell, his knees giving way. A heartfelt prayer of thanks went up.

"What is the answer? Prove to me there *is* an answer."

"Of course. It's DAVID. D is five hundred. V is five. A, the first letter, and I, the first number, take up their stations between."

With that the world unfroze. Buer came to a crashing halt beside the wall just a split second after the bishop's rooster, King David, began crowing lustily. Cock a doodle doo! Cock a doodle doo! COCK A DOODLE DOOOOOO! It startled the other skeletal black rooster into crowing as well. St. Joder hastily scrambled out of the bell just as the demon set it down. The earth had never felt so sweet under him as it did then. He raised his hands in exultation.

“I will not be kept from your soul,” Abbraxas screamed. “I don’t care what wager we made. I don’t care who got here before the rooster crowed. I don’t care who couldn’t answer the riddle. I spit on it all. I shall take your soul and I shall take it now!”

Abbraxas levitated into the air and thrust out his arm toward the bell, causing it to rise as well. As he and the bell rose together, Buer leaped to the top of the walls. Over the walls came flapping Azazel, just arriving. The three continued to rise together higher in the air, taking the bell with them.

“Die, you worthless cur!”

The little demon cocked back his arm and hurled the bell straight at St. Joder. The old man desperately lunged to one side as the bell crashed into the earth inches away from where he had been standing, shattering into dozens of gleaming shards. The sound was like the breaking of the world on Judgment Day. When the dust settled, all St. Joder could do was stare in stupefied horror at what remained of the glorious bell. How could this have happened? What would he do now? He slowly passed his hand over his face.

“Speak to the bell, bishop.”

St. Joder looked through his fingers in the early dawn light for who had spoken. People were stirring and leaving their homes, drawn by all the noise and commotion. The voice was thin and tiny. He looked down. There was a mouse near his foot looking up.

“Lay hands on the pieces and speak them into wholeness, bishop. Do it now.”

Muttering under his breath about grapes and owls and now this, St. Joder knelt down beside the shards and extended his hands over them. This time his voice was steadier than it had been in alpine meadow.

“In the name of the Lord of Hosts, I say to you broken pieces, be whole.”

St. Joder looked up. A small crowd had gathered. A collective gasp came from their throats as they watched the pieces stir. The fragments lifted into the air and fitted themselves together, coming into contact with a musical sound. Before everyone’s eyes the cracks healed and the bell re-formed without sign of seam or dent.

“I command you, oh Bell, to ring.”

The bell lifted higher and higher into the air, hovering a short distance away from the demons, who were still watching.

Bong!

Its deep throated tolling was like the shout of Gabriel come to call God’s people home.

BONG!

The sound was a cleansing wave washing the world right and clean. The demons screamed and covered their ears in agony, curling into balls and turning away.

## BONG!

The people would never forget that day when the bell awoke and for just a moment heaven lay there within their grasp.

With a piercing wail the three demons turned and fled, never to be seen in Sitten again.

Slowly the bell returned to earth, lit by the early light into a shining glory. The old bishop's face was lit up almost as much. In his mind were the words he had heard in the meadow: *When that which is broken mends, my voice will awaken and drive all foes to flight.*

“People, come and see, come and see! This is a gift from the Bishop of Rome. Its voice saved my soul today and it is my fervent prayer that its sound will remind us of the mercy and protection that surrounds us every day.”

He then proceeded to tell them of all the events that had happened that night from what he heard yesterday evening at the bridge to the bell in front of them now. Finally someone in the crowd asked, “What will we do with this bell now that it is here?”

“Do with it? Do with it? We'll build a tower on this church so the bell's voice will ring clear and loud from mountains to mountains across the Rhone. And never again will demons afflict this place.”



Indeed, they never did, not in the sixteen centuries since. From that day on there was a lightening of people's hearts, and a feeling of hope that was rare in those days stirred. What had been muffled and bound before now broke loose, and those who heard the voice of St. Joder took up the strength to learn and grow and build. The church rose quickly after that, and was filled with a joyous throng, and the shout when the tower was completed and bell hoisted into place must have reached around the world. The people say that after that whenever there was a raging storm, lightning or hail or wind, the bell's voice would ring out and the weather would disperse without harming anyone or anything. “Just listen for the bell,” they would say, “and pray. God doesn't always need beams of light or angels with flaming swords to speak.” And then they would look at Bishop Joder and smile. The old man would smile back

*St. Joder's bell doesn't exist anymore, but when it was in Sitten, small chips of it were taken from time to time from around the edge and melted into new bells at their casting. This was a custom so that the blessing of the original might be*

*transferred to the new. There are many bells in churches of Switzerland today that claim they have a piece of St. Joder's bell in theirs.*

*Names are little stories all tied up, some bound so tightly they almost can't be unknotted. The stories and legends of St. Joder, alongside the few facts, were circulated for centuries, and in time his name was attached to several places, including a hill. Still more centuries later, it became more and more common for people to choose surnames, and the families that had lived on Joder Hill for time out of mind naturally chose that name for themselves. Still more centuries yet, when a few families entered the Anabaptist movement and were viciously persecuted by both Catholic and mainstream Reformers, they chose to immigrate to the new world. These still spelled their surname Joder, but it didn't take more than a generation or two for it to be anglicized to Yoder, and that is how my name came to be. It is good to know your name has a story, a root, that started long ago with one man who was faithful to God. If you travel to Sitten today, the people there will tell you they do not always remember everything about the life of that one man, but they will say, "Bishops come and bishops go, but none was as faithful and loving and holy a man as St. Joder."*



Sitten (Sion), Switzerland today

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