

Lenten Sermon Series #1

“What Led to the Cross?—Judas”

March 10th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

1st Sunday in Lent

Based on Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16, 20-25

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16, 20-25

¹ When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ² “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” ³ Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, ⁴ and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ⁵ But they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver.

¹⁶ And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

²⁰ When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; ²¹ and while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” ²² And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, “Surely not I, Lord?” ²³ He answered, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.

²⁴ The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.” ²⁵ Judas, who betrayed him, said, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” He replied, “You have said so.” [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: God of love, God of understanding, God of the Lenten journey, help us to discern your still, small voice. Open us to change and growth that we may walk with Christ, this day and all our days. In Jesus’ name we pray; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

The Season of Lent Has Begun

As of this past Ash Wednesday, the season of Lent has begun—a forty-day preparation period in anticipation of first, Good Friday, and then the Easter celebration to follow just days later. Just as we carefully prepare for big events in our personal lives, such as a wedding or a commencement (or something similarly special), Lent invites us to make our hearts ready for remembering Jesus’ passion and celebrating Jesus’ resurrection.

The practice of a forty-day preparation period began in the early Christian church during the third and fourth centuries, and it has been used for several things. Historically, Lent included the instruction of persons for baptism and profession of faith on Easter Sunday. And, it has also been used as a time of calling back those who have become estranged from the church, as well as a time for all Christians to deepen their piety, devotion, and commitment to discipleship.

A Journey Toward Jerusalem and the Cross

For me, I have always believed, and have taught others, that Lent is a time when we all spend the next six weeks on a journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the cross. On our liturgical calendar, every year the Sunday prior to the start of Lent is known as *Transfiguration of the Lord* Sunday, which we acknowledged last week—a service of worship focused on the story of Jesus’ transfiguration that is shared among the first three gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And, in those three gospels, the transfiguration story marks a distinctive point in Jesus’ ministry—because from the transfiguration event and going forward, every step Jesus and the disciples take is toward Jerusalem. And so, as in prior years, we will journey with them.

Sermon Series: What Led to the Cross?

This year during the season of Lent, I am providing a sermon series on a few of the main characters involved in the final days of Jesus’ journey. My goal is to provide context and background as to who and what actually led Jesus to the cross. And, we will ask questions such as ... what were the circumstances that led up to and through the trial and execution of Jesus Christ? There can be no doubt that Jesus was executed, but why? Why was Jesus arrested? Why was Jesus put on trial? Why was Jesus condemned to die on the cross?

Because here’s the reality—despite Jesus’ warnings and words to his

followers, his death was a complete shock—it was totally unanticipated. Even more, the death of Jesus was an embarrassing and demoralizing event for Jesus’ early followers and for a young church proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Son of God throughout the Roman Empire. You see, in the thinking of the Roman world, sons of God and heroes and saviors did not die on crosses. So how can the teachings of a man who died so horrifically be considered “good news?” It’s definitely worth exploring! So on this first Sunday in Lent, we will begin our exploration and journey to the cross with the disciple, Judas Iscariot ...

First, the Last Supper

First, the Last Supper ... In the verses immediately following our gospel reading from Matthew today comes the recounting of the Last Supper. The Last Supper is one of the most important features of the whole Holy Week drama, the centerpiece of what we now call *Maundy Thursday*. It is significant because when Jesus wanted to give his closest friends and followers the most accurate understanding possible of what he was about to do, he didn’t give them an abstract idea or theory—he gave them an action—a meal ... to be shared forever.

As a meal, it was a moment of friendship. It was a moment of being a family. It was a sharing of love as a feeling, *and* Love as a reality at the table. As a Passover meal, it was a moment of liberation. It was a moment where friends and believers were celebrating the freedom of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt, made possible by the “pass over” of the homes of God’s people. And, it was a foreshadowing of the liberating, saving grace made possible through Jesus’ death.

And, then from John’s gospel, we have the foot washing—an intimate and profound moment when God touched individual lives through Jesus’ actions, saying, “I’m doing this for you.” In that story, Jesus comes to each disciple in turn as a Servant. He comes with water and a towel, and washes

their feet. His actions say as clearly as anything ever could that this was a personal, sacred moment—that God wants to wash us and clean us—every part of us—the sad parts, the lonely parts, the messy parts, and the heartbreaking parts. In the Last Supper, God makes it personal, and God says to each of us: Taste my bread, drink from my cup, and let me wash you.

Secondly, Judas Iscariot

And, so this is the context of Judas Iscariot's act of betrayal—for Judas had his feet washed, too. He had tasted the bread and he had shared the cup. Judas was one of Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples, and he had served as the Treasurer of Jesus' traveling band of followers throughout those three years of ministry. He was trusted and he was loved. So why would Judas sell Jesus out?

Well, nobody can be sure. All four gospels agree he played some role in Jesus' arrest, but details differ widely. Mark's gospel portrayal is silent to Judas' motives or his subsequent fate. Luke and John both portray Judas as a villain. Later in the book of Acts, Luke names Judas a traitor and his death by accidental fall (Acts 1:18). And, John accuses Judas of violating Jesus' friendship, and also adds the accusation that Judas stole from Jesus and the other disciples earlier in Jesus' ministry. Perhaps, like other disciples, Judas was worried about where he stood in the pecking order. Or, perhaps he was reacting to some imagined slight from Jesus. Or, perhaps he thought his role within Jesus' outfit was beneath him. Or, maybe Judas had lost his patience with Jesus, and he had gotten fed up with waiting for Jesus to take the world by storm. Or, maybe since Judas already had a reputation for dipping into the kitty from time to time, he was easily enticed by the cash involved in his payment from the Jewish authorities.

Matthew's Gospel Offers More Details

And, here's where Matthew's version adds a few more details. Matthew

specifies the payment Judas receives for handing Jesus over—30 pieces of silver (the value of 30 *pieces of silver* was roughly equal to 120 days' wages! (Matthew 26:15)). So maybe the cash *had been* part of it. Ultimately, scripture does not provide us with any clear answers. All we know for sure is that Judas slipped out of the Last Supper party before it was over, and then led the authorities to the garden to arrest his master, his rabbi, his teacher, and his friend. The pre-arranged signal to the guards was to strong-arm the one whom he would kiss—another act that doesn't so much identify Jesus as it does intensify the horror of Judas' betrayal.

What to Think of Judas?

As a result of his actions, Judas has been a perplexing character ever since. Some non-biblical manuscripts from the early church show that speculations about Judas continued for many years following Jesus' death, some even interestingly portraying Judas as Jesus' most faithful disciple—the one who understood more than any other what Jesus had to accomplish *and* that he had to help him do it.

But, beyond speculation, our scriptures do record that Judas tried to give the money back to the ones who'd given it to him ... and then he went out and ended his life. Jesus had already told him, "Woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." (Matt. 26:24) I have always imagined Judas spending his last hours being profoundly, painfully tormented by what he had done, even if by some degree he and Jesus both knew it was necessary.

In his typically wonderful way, Presbyterian pastor and author, Frederick Buechner, writes:

"There is a tradition in the early church, however, that his suicide was based not on despair but on hope. If God was just, then he knew there was no question where he would be heading as soon as he'd breathed his last. Furthermore, if God was also merciful, he knew there was no

question either that in a last-ditch effort to save the souls of the damned as God's son, Jesus would be down there too. Thus the way Judas figured it, hell might be the last chance he'd have of making it to heaven, so to get there as soon as possible, he tied the rope around his neck and kicked away the stool. Who knows? In any case, it's a scene to conjure with. Once again they met in the shadows, the two old friends, both of them a little worse for wear after all that had happened, only this time it was Jesus who was the one to give the kiss."¹

What Led to the Cross?—Judas

Judas Iscariot was the first domino to fall in the sequence of events and characters that led Jesus to the cross. And, his fate was just as much left in God's hands as was the fate of Jesus, whose journey to the cross was not yet finished ... in fact, it was just getting started.

May God bless us all as we continue our own journey toward Jerusalem and the cross. Amen.

¹ Buechner, Frederick. Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith. HarperOne: New York, 2004. pp.205-206.