

April 5, 2020

Passion Sunday

Matthew 26: 14-56

Prayer: O Lord, let us understand what the Passion of the Christ really means. Let us take from this final Sunday of Lent what you would have us take, what you would have us feel, what you would have us believe.

We pray in the name of the one who lived it. Amen.

The Worst Thing

If you have worshiped with us or heard me address a civic club or a book club, you have probably heard me say one thing.

It's the same thing I tell everybody who tours our building, everyone who attends a Back Yard Mission Day, everyone who asks about Playback Café.

And this is it: A homeless man once asked me, "Pastor, do you know the worst thing about being homeless? It's not being cold or wet or hungry. The worst thing about being homeless ... is being looked right through."

I think that's not unlike what Jesus would tell us. *You know the worst thing about my death? It wasn't the beatings or the crucifixion or the thirst. The worst thing about my death ... was the betrayal.*

Why do I think that? Because of the way Matthew writes his story of Jesus's last hours. He infuses it with betrayal.

We've mentioned in here that when something is repeated three or six times in a Scripture passage, we are to sit up and take notice.

Well, in Matthew's extended passion narrative – which is much longer than what we will read today – he uses the words *betray* or *betrayed* 11 times. He uses *desert* or *deserter* four times. He uses *deny* five times.

In all, that is 20 times that Matthew uses some form of these words to indicate the abandonment of Jesus as he went through his Last Supper, his arrest, his trials and his crucifixion. Twenty times.

And that doesn't even count his lonely cry from the cross: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

I think we are supposed to sit up and take notice.

It's always a challenge to choose Scripture for today because it is both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. We could spend our time on the ride into Jerusalem. *Ride on, King Jesus!*

Or we could spend our time at the cross. *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

I almost always choose the cross, the Passion. For to not do so, is to skip a quarter of our gospel writings. To skip blithely into Easter without an understanding of the pain, the sacrifice.

I don't want to read the entire passage on a video, but even in this abbreviated reading, note all the verbs and nouns that indicate abandonment.

Reading from **Matthew 26: 14-56.**

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

pieces of silver. ¹⁶And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to **betray** him.

(Then there is a section about setting up the Passover meal. Skipping to v. 20...)

20 When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; ²¹and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will **betray** me.'²²And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?'

²³He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will **betray** me. ²⁴The 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.'

²⁵Judas, who **betrayed** him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?'

He replied, 'You have said so.'

(Skip down to v. 30.)

They went out to the Mount of Olives.

31 Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become **deserters** because of me this night; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

³²But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.'

³³Peter said to him, 'Though all become **deserters** because of you, I will never **desert** you.' ³⁴Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will **deny** me three times.' ³⁵Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not **deny** you.' And so said all the disciples.

36 Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane.

(There we have the story of Peter, James and John falling asleep. Skip to v. 45)

⁴⁵Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is **betrayed** into the hands of

sinner. ⁴⁶Get up, let us be going. See, my **betray**er is at hand.'

47 While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸Now the **betray**er had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.'

⁴⁹At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.

(Then we read about the arrest and the cutting of a guard's ear. And then this final convicting line:)

Then *all the disciples* **deserted** him and fled.

That last line kind of sums it up, doesn't it? "**All the disciples deserted him and fled.**"

And it gets worse. We didn't even get to the part about Peter denying Jesus three times by the fire in the courtyard. We didn't get to the part

where Jesus, the incarnation of God himself, cried out from the cross,
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Mel Gibson’s famous movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, did a good job of showing the physical pain of the last 12 hours of Jesus’s life. It’s harder to show the emotional pain of the betrayals, the denials, the desertions, the forsakenness.

For if the story of Jesus is the greatest story ever told, then surely this part is the saddest story ever told. For three years, these 12 disciples had been Jesus’s constant companions. Think of all they’d been through together.

Banquets at the fine homes of tax collectors. Nights sleeping under the stars.

Riding out storms on the Sea of Galilee. Attending weddings – with wine!

Witnessing exorcisms. Seeing blind men healed.

Watching Lazarus emerge from the tomb.

Hearing Jesus teach in synagogues and watching, probably terrified, as he overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple.

And now, they were scared that what was waiting for Jesus would spill over onto them as well. And so the people he loved and cherished and trusted most betrayed him. Deserted him. Denied him.

You know, we are living in a time of great fear. And fear can cause bad behavior, as we saw with the disciples.

Fox News disseminates sarcasm and ridicule instead of correct information, and then lies about it.

People clear out stores of what they need without worrying about what their neighbors may need.

Science deniers of all ilks convene crowds for worship services or pronounce that the coronavirus is God's judgment on humans.

We can betray our true Christian faith as surely as Judas did.

In our vocabulary, a Judas is a friend who turns on us, a friend who betrays our trust. A Judas goat is the animal that leads sheep or cattle into the slaughterhouse, luring animals to their death.

This first Judas, Judas Iscariot, took 30 pieces of silver from the chief priests to point them to a time and place they might arrest Jesus without inciting the crowds in Jerusalem. Judas and the priests didn't come up with that price out of thin air. Thirty pieces of silver was the payment commanded in the book of Exodus when a man's servant was gored by an ox.

In other words, it represented the price of a servant's life. It was payment for a suffering servant.

After taking the money, Judas reclined at the Passover meal with Jesus. Only the two of them understood the words that passed between them.

Jesus said, **“The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.”**

Judas replied, **“Surely not I, Rabbi?”**

I am always struck by the treachery that runs through this Last Supper. Just before they ate, Jesus warned of one who would betray him. Just after they ate, Jesus told the disciples that they *all* would desert him before the night was over.

Peter simply couldn't believe that. **“Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you,”** he said. And all the disciples agreed.

They then went to Gethsemane, where Peter, James and John practiced the small betrayal of sleep when Jesus needed them. The scene ended with Jesus saying, **“See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”**

Judas kissed him, Jesus was arrested, and the inevitable drama was set in motion.

And then there is a simple, almost throwaway line, at the end of the arrest. **“Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.”**

All the disciples deserted him and fled.

How lonely Jesus must have felt.

How lonely we feel when we have been betrayed.

For we cannot be betrayed by strangers. We can be betrayed only by friends, only by loved ones.

Years ago, we realized that a lot of the people we see at Triune have been betrayed in the most unspeakable ways. Not just neglect, but out-and-out abuse. And those betrayals lie at the root of mental illness and mental anguish and post-traumatic stress disorder and self-medication and addiction.

With counseling and welcome and community, with trauma-informed care, we have tried to bust the barriers of distrust and self-destruction that have been erected as a result.

Betrayal is a part of the human condition. And that is why Jesus faced betrayal at the end of his life. That is why he faced the worst thing we know.

I think he wanted to face what we face, experience what we experience, be betrayed as we are betrayed.

That is why we have a savior who understands betrayal. He knows the hurt and the anguish and the misery of being let down. And he can enter into that hurt with us.

The season of Lent is important because it cautions us not to rush to an easy Easter. We cannot reach Easter without the trials and the crucifixion, without the humiliation and the betrayals.

In the same way, we cannot rush to health and joy without acknowledging the betrayals that have taken place in our lives.

In this Holy Week, may we seek healing for ourselves and our neighbor.

May we seek solidarity with our Lord.

Amen.