

Betrayal and Denial
John 18:1-27
Lent Midweek II
March 4, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In these five Lenten midweeks, we take time to meditate upon the Passion of Our Lord, from the Upper Room to the Sealed Tomb, as recorded in St John's gospel. It's a path we mentally trod every Good Friday during the afternoon service, but it's seldom one upon which we take the time to actually meditate for weeks on end.

Yet, before we begin our meditation, a word of caution: it's imperative we not meditate upon the Passion of our Lord in a manner that causes us to overlook or downplay the history, as if in trying to make it relevant, we relegate it to being a narrative with its own "moral of the story", or insert ourselves into it as if walking alongside the 'characters'. The 19th century hymn, "Were You There" was loved for a generation or two as the Church adapted the African American spiritual into the hymnal, but it tries too hard to place the worshipper in the midst of the situation. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Of course not... that was 2000 years ago.

Yet, we must guard against the opposite error, which is to think that history is not worth meditating upon at all... that, if we can't walk in it, then it must be irrelevant. Not remotely, from history comes all the lessons and benefits of history. As for *lessons*, St Paul

calls the Israelites in the wilderness “our example, that we may not sin like they did.” As for *benefits*, if God has inserted himself into human history, then there are divine benefits/consequences that flow from that one-time insertion into history... flow from that through the years and down to the rest of human history. And thus, to learn of the history of the Passion of our Lord is also to learn of the lessons and benefits and consequences of it all for you and for me.

We begin with the door of the Upper Room fading into the distance as Jesus and his disciples head to the garden. It’s fitting that the passion readings begin here because the safety and solemnity of that Upper Room, though it fades into the background during our Lord’s Passion, is still *in* the background and is never forgotten. For there in the Upper Room is the *oath* of the new covenant; there in the Upper Room is the *promise* of festal serenity that all of the coming passion is meant to seal and fulfill. Jesus had said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood,” and – while there and then, at that meal and for those disciples, that cup miraculously stood “outside of” time/history – for the sake of history and for the benefit of history, that new covenant had to be sealed by the blood of the testator (the book of Hebrews reminds us). If that Upper Room meal is not going to be lost to history, but is going to benefit all of history, then the covenant *must* be sealed, the death *must* be completed, the covenant *must* be etched in history... and so, our text begins with an

all-important phrase, “When Jesus had spoken these words” ... words about the covenant, words that promise and institute the meal of the covenant, words that change all of human history from a history of the old creation’s preparation for the Messiah to a history of the new creation’s birth on account of the Messiah.

And, if this is the magnitude of what is coming and what is now about to be fulfilled, it gives us insight into how lost and confused are his disciples.

Think about how lost they were: When one *understands* the magnitude of what is about to happen and what consequences it has on all of human history, he does not for a moment flee or forsake the goal of ensuring that such accomplishment comes to pass. Imagine a soldier knowing that just around the corner was the capture of the enemy’s king; would that soldier not risk life and limb for the benefit of his countrymen? Even in something as trivial as a sport’s championship game, will players not risk their already injured bodies or concussed heads for a chance to hold a mere trophy? Then, would we not expect the disciples – had they known the magnitude of this moment for all of history – would they not have followed Jesus to the cross itself, even if it meant their own death? Peter will follow, follow to the swinging of swords and cutting off ears... but not follow to *the cross*. Is it that he and his fellow disciples simply don’t know or understand the magnitude of this moment for all history?

Perhaps we can't plead their ignorance... for, had Jesus not told them, had he not taught them – for three years – first in veiled fashion, but more recently, the Scriptures said,

“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”?

Yes, so plainly he had told them “from that time on.” From *which* time? From the moment that Peter had on behalf of the Twelve, confessed of this Jesus, “You are the Christ.” Yes, if this Jesus is the Christ, then we should expect him quite plainly to occupy the altar meant for the Christ, that seat of substitution meant for the Christ, that he might crush the enemy underfoot as the first gospel prophecy had promised.

And yet, it was in that same moment of confessing Jesus to be that long-promised Christ, recall, that Peter had pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him for speaking of the cross, and Jesus had had to say to one of his closest, dearest disciples, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a hindrance to me! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but the things of man.”

That exchange had been some time earlier, perhaps just before the Transfiguration... and yet, here again, as it becomes quite plain that the hour has come for the Christ to go to his sacrificial altar and atone for the whole world and accomplish the promises of God

and seal his covenant with man, the disciples know only confusion, betrayal, denial, cowardice. Is it ignorance, or is it the same work of Satan – “Get behind me, Satan.” Is it ignorance, or is it faithlessness?

By Jesus’ own testimony we cannot say it was ignorance. Even as his disciples were betraying him, fleeing him, denying him, pleading ignorance, he was confessing before the high priest,

“I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.”

Now, this is where we must not make the mistake either of referring to a fictional “moral of the story” OR of considering ourselves distant observers to irrelevant history: Friends, Jesus has spoken quite plainly. You know what he has declared. Your unwillingness to stand with him in daily life, follow him in daily life, confess him in daily life... it’s not out of ignorance; it’s nothing short of cowardice, denial, betrayal. We can claim all we want that 2000 years have clouded what Jesus truly said, but we know that’s not the case. We know that His Word is plainly spoken, plainly recorded, plainly confessed, plainly preached. To disassociate ourselves from it, to not want to be recognized as his followers, to confess it only when it’s convenient to our daily life’s comfort and success... who are we fooling except ourselves? Who are we lying to, but ourselves? At least Peter could claim that the enemy wasn’t yet defeated... that

there was still that corner to turn to find the enemy's king and depose and conquer him. But, we live (as we heard last week St Paul write to the Corinthians) we live in the day of salvation, we live in the safety and splendor not of the Upper Room just out of reach in the darkness of night, but the Upper Room's promises and covenant now sealed and certain and sacramentally gifted.

So, what reason, what excuse do we have to join with Peter in denying, or Judas in betraying, the Lord's plainly spoken Word of Truth? Such is not mere ignorance, but is the devil's game. "Did God really say?", he has tempted every generation to re-examine the plain and holy Word of God. But Jesus has spoken openly. What justification do we have to live as if his preaching is a lie, his Passion is irrelevant, his procurement of our salvation is a relic of history?

Repent... repent of allowing Satan to play you as a fiddle and tempt you to justify your cowardice in the face of an unbelieving world. Repent where you are honestly ignorant regarding the Word of God, for – if we are being honest with ourselves – is such ignorance because the Word of God is secretive, clouded, and difficult to understand? Or is our ignorance because we have not thought it important to prioritize and thoroughly learn the holy Word of God Most High... learn not as if solving a mysterious, coded word, but hearing and internalizing the plain and simple Word of God and teaching of Christ Jesus?

But as you despair of yourself, you have no need to despair of Jesus. For, even as he knew his Twelve were running when victory over the enemy was at hand, he resolutely set his face to the appointed altar of Calvary. Even as he knew his disciples were fleeing (as he had predicted they would), he made the good confession before the Sanhedrin. Doesn't St Paul even urge Timothy to remember this good confession of Jesus as the image of the Good Shepherd standing to defend and safeguard his sheep?

Yes, this too is what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Just as Isaiah had prophesied when he penned by divine inspiration, "We all like sheep have gone astray," and Jesus himself had declared in the safety of that Upper Room, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' Yes, Jesus knew it all would happen just as it did, and yet – for us and for our salvation – he was not deterred but continued forward to breach the enemy's stronghold and dethrone and take captive the tyrant.

And, if this all happened in history, what reason do we then have to live as if it didn't? What reason do we have to doubt or deny Christ's command over this world, his rule over sin, death, and the devil, his authority to forgive, to raise to life, his plain-spoken Law and Gospel to define and govern this life and ground our hopes for the life of the world to come?

We can plead no ignorance: if Christ came into this world because of sin, then sin is truly a great enemy which demands our attention. If Christ came into this world to stay His Father's righteous anger toward sinners, then our standing before the Father truly demands our attention. If Christ came into this world and overcame sin and accomplished the will of His Father, then our dependence upon and life in Christ truly is our greatest treasure... so that, clinging to him, safe in him, we may cry with desperate boldness, "Kyrie Eleison. Lord, have mercy."

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
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