

Sermon – “...about to betray him...”

April 3, 2022 – Lent 5

Whenever I read (or preach) this portion of John’s gospel, I think through the passion story too, because if we’re reading John 12, we’re very close to that creation-altering narrative that describes Jesus’ last days. There are details here in John 12 that resonate with the story that will soon dominate our worship – an intimate dinner, a ritual reminder of Passover, anxiety among and between the disciples, betrayal (and worse!) This is part of the passion story in my mind, this celebration supper that foreshadows so much grief.

So of course, Mary’s extravagance is appropriate, given her brother’s miraculous recovery; and Jesus offers a solemn reminder of the realities of the world beyond this particular celebration (‘You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.’). And then there’s Judas.

This is a part of the passion narrative because it at this dinner table that we are introduced to the villain of the piece. John’s gospel is determined to give us the bad guy with the parenthetical comments about Judas’ motives and attitude. We have been walking in the presence of the living God. We must be prepared for the utterly awful moment of betrayal, and Judas is a crucial character. John’s gospel, for all its high theological ideas, brings us a clear view of the humanity of these important moments.

The events surrounding Jesus’ arrest, execution and resurrection are critical to the Christian faith, but they have been burdened by the idea that God somehow requires this level of brutality. A misunderstanding about the “need for Jesus to die for our sins” drives much of Christian thinking – a fatalistic, “God is in control” mindset is understandable, but problematic. This suggests that God is full of

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vengeance – a vindictive, deal-making deity who would hold us hostage to our mistakes. The point that this episode in John’s gospel makes is that the passion narrative - while it points us to God - is a human narrative. Jesus’ story needs a villain, and those villains walk on two legs – flesh and blood – acting for their own reasons and in their own manner.

The tragedy of Jesus’ arrest, conviction and crucifixion requires human agency. God may allow it, but God doesn’t cause it – God doesn’t require it – God didn’t do it (nor did the devil.) This is a human story whose outcome features yet another Divine revelation. God shows up. God redeems. God forgives. God doesn’t ‘require’ Jesus’ death. Humans do.

From the beginning of our Biblical story, God is determined to work by human means; the first humans are invited to be partners – and they, by their actions, refuse. Abraham, Isaac & Jacob are enlisted as partners too – with varying degrees of success. Moses, David, Solomon.... you get the picture. Incredible things are reported and observed and accomplished, but humanity is the means by which these things come to light. And through it all, God is with us.

So, Judas is the bad guy – properly attested here in John 12 – and the religious authorities and the Romans step in to take their share of the blame in short order. Human motives populate the memorable moments of Jesus’ life. Humanity makes its own way, either in obedience and faithfulness, as Jesus shows us, or in the journey from grief to celebration to grief again, as with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Judas models betrayal and bitterness; the pharisees model fear and a love of power; the Romans model ruthless efficiency, and so it goes... And God is with us.

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When we focus on the betrayal, we also feel quite content in our vilification of Judas. We are free to cast him aside, and along with him, anyone we imagine has betrayed us. When we focus on the struggle for power, we are equally happy to point out that power that doesn't agree with us – or doesn't reflect our particular values or opinions – is 'bad power,' and we only want to wield our power in defence of the poor, or for the 'greater good.' (Even the disciples make this mistake – Peter in particular – when they (he) offer to take up arms against those who have come to arrest Jesus in the garden.) When we decide the world is an 'us-against-them' battleground, everyone loses. Every time.

We are slow to learn the lessons God tries so hard to teach.

The state of the world has some people of faith longing for the end of it all. The chaos and lawlessness – the tragedy of war – plague and famine – some will say these are signs that 'God will soon step in and make it all new. These folks can quote chapter and verse to support their claim, and they even go so far as to call it good news. But the good news isn't found in our human propensity to fight for power, or to hoard our abundance.

In the early stages of the story – hearing only this morning's Gospel as a prelude – it is hard to find good news... until we remember that they were gathered to give thanks.

God isn't found in power or betrayal, or vengeance, or vicious demands. God is found at the table – in the powerfully pleasant fragrance that fills the room – in the gratitude that Mary, Martha and Lazarus express to Jesus.

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When we focus on the celebration – the extravagance (of Mary) and the potential for limitless grace, that is when we see how God acts. When we gather to celebrate – offer worship – share at table; these moments bring us joy and a sense that something wonderful is possible. Divine power still finds expression in human activity. God is still with us.

So, while we wait for some time-shattering, prophecy-laden miracle to mark the end of all suffering and sorrow, remember that there are still tears to be dried, food to be shared, and there are still things to be celebrated. God is with us, but the promises of God come to life in us when we act in faith - when we reach out – when we stop to help – when we gather to celebrate. Human activity is crucial to Jesus’ story from beginning to end, and it is just as important in the unfolding of God’s eternal plan – what ever it may be.