



Lent 1
Take Up Your Cross
March 5, 2006

John 18:1-11
The Arrest
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This morning I am beginning a new series of sermons titled: Take Up Your Cross. During the Sundays in Lent, we will follow the Gospel of John's record of the events that transpired from the night of Jesus' arrest to the time Pilate handed him over to be crucified. We will be blessed each week to have our chancel choir sing these same scriptural texts as they have been marvelously interpreted by Johann Sebastian Bach in his great work, *The Passion According to St John*.

The worst things in life seem to happen at night. It is in the night time that our fears overwhelm us and our loneliness becomes unbearable. We then feel exhausted, depleted, and wonder if we have not lost our way. Crises always seem to occur in the dark as well. Even if they actually happened in the daytime, in our memory of them there is no light. That is what a crisis does — it makes it hard to see the light.

The 18th chapter of John tells that it was dark when Jesus was betrayed by Judas in the garden. The tragic irony is that the entire 17th chapter depicts Jesus' prayer that the disciples would be unified. But no sooner is that prayer completed than Judas appears with a detachment of soldiers as well as police from the chief priests and the Pharisees. We are told that they came carrying lanterns and torches and weapons. How many times has the world seen this same mob — men driven crazy with fear that has turned to hatred, determined to arrest, kidnap, or lynch someone they do not understand who is different from the mob? This mob is led by Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples. The other gospels tell us that Judas betrayed him with a kiss, which is a sign of intimacy that has now turned dark.

Throughout history, we have always reserved our greatest judgment for those who commit some act of betrayal or treason. Betrayal is a sin against trust. It shatters loyalty and faith, and it breaks apart the unity Jesus prays for us to know. Somebody we trusted, who got close enough to kiss us, has turned against us.

How many times have I spoken with someone who is devastated by a family member, colleague, or a friend who betrayed them? These were once trusted people. They were supposed to be on our side. So we allowed them to get into our hearts, but they used what they found there to hurt us. We can handle our enemies in life, but how do we defend ourselves against betrayal?

We have always been hard on Judas, and all his current imitators. But could it be that our reason for showing him so little compassion is that we're afraid there is a Judas chromosome in us as well, a *dark* possibility that we too may betray the things we believe? We don't know how it

could happen, or even why, anymore than we know why Judas betrayed Christ, but we fear the possibility that we too may do something to undermine the things most important to us. We know who Jesus Christ is and what his convictions are. We know that in calling ourselves Christians we are embracing those convictions as part of our creed for life. What we don't know is when the little pocket of anger, fear, or selfishness that remains in our hearts is going to take over.

At the Last Supper, when Jesus claimed that one of the twelve would betray him, the fragility of all of the disciples' relationships with him were revealed by each of them saying, "Surely it is not I, Lord?" It was as if to say, "I have been worried about that, but I was sure I had it under control." The sin that is always most difficult to forgive in another is the one we struggle with in our own lives. No one is as merciless to others as those who have no mercy on their own evil, and who live in dread of the day their betrayal chromosome will kick in. We fear Judas more than we do the cross. The cross is a symbol of heroic self sacrifice. But Judas is a symbol of the evil within all of us.

When Peter realized what Judas was about to do, he rushed into the crowd of soldiers with his sword flailing. But all he succeeded in doing was cutting off the ear of the innocent servant of the high priest. It is significant that we are given the name of this servant, which is Malchus. I believe that is because the text wants us to remember that the innocent bystanders who are hurt by our crazed violence have names. They are real people, who matter.

History has been more kind to Peter than it has to Judas. We admire his headstrong determination to help Jesus. Earlier in their ministry together, when Jesus kept talking about going to a cross, Peter was the one who tried to take him aside to say he would never let that happen. Trying to make good on that promise, this disciple of Christ throws himself into the mob with a sword. But to be clear, initiating this violence is really just another way of betraying the prince of peace.

So the bloodbath was about to begin again, as it has so many times in so many places. But according to Luke, this time Jesus stepped into the middle of it and said, "No more of this!" We can hear him in the midst of our most violent moments as well saying, "No more of this! No more hurting people because you are sure you are right. No more suicide bombers. No more worshipers being blown apart in Sunni and Shite temples. No more tribes rising up against others in Africa. No more ignoring the poor in Pittsburgh just because they scare you. And no more using the tongue to destroy the reputation of others. No more of this! No more violence."

Living in a fallen world means that, tragically, there may at times be no choice but to pick up a sword and defend ourselves. But we dare not think we are doing that to defend Jesus, because the moment we pick up a sword to defend Jesus, we've already lost. Jesus came to die for the sins of all, even our enemies, and we betray him whenever we insist that Jesus is on our side. He died for Muslims and Christians and Jews. He died for homosexuals and heterosexuals, for pro-lifers and pro-choice people. He died for you, and your ex-spouse, and the boss who fired you, and every Judas who has turned on you. He died even for the Judas within your soul.

According to John, after telling Peter to put his sword back in its sheath, Jesus said, "Am I not to drink of the cup that the Father has given me?" In order to fully understand this phrase we need to remember that the Hebrew prophets - Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Obadiah,

Zechariah - all used the Cup of the Lord as a metaphor for the judgment of God. These prophets depicted God's disgust with our betrayal of him, others, and ourselves. According to Jeremiah, from the perspective of heaven we would have to be drunk to be so self-destructive. So God loves us in the only way that is left for him, which is to abandon us to this crazed violent life we have chosen until we get to the bottom of it. Thus, he says if you want to be that intoxicated, then drink from my cup as well.

So when Jesus says he will drink from the cup the Father has given, he is saying that he will take on the judgment for us. This means you don't have to keep trying to atone for your own sins, as if you could. That is why Jesus begins the journey to the cross — to provide a means of forgiving us. We are not abandoned. In Christ, God has found us.

Jesus Christ has forever transformed the Cup of the Lord. No longer is it a cup of judgment. When we come to the Table of the Lord, it is now to take in the cup of mercy and forgiveness for everything we have done that has betrayed the goodness of our created nature and Christian identity. Not only does it forgive, but this mercy can even heal the wounds we have caused to others and to ourselves. Listen carefully to the Communion Anthem that will soon be sung. "From all my body's torments, fully to heal me, he himself is wounded."

The Early Church was excited about this grace that forgives and heals. So they used to drink from the Lord's cup every week in worship. For three hundred years the church was regularly persecuted, often violently, but when they gathered around the Lord's table the church used the same communion liturgy we still use today. It began with the pastor saying "The Lord be with you" and the congregation responding "And also with you." "Lift up your hearts," the pastor then said. "We lift them up to the Lord," the congregation claimed. This persecuted, beaten down, impoverished church is filled with joy. Why? Because God is not against them!

Do you see? It doesn't matter how dark the night, or how violent the world becomes, what others do to you, or even what your own Judas chromosome does to you. If you believe God is not against you, and if you believe the Lord is with you, then you have every reason to lift up your heart. As John promised in the opening lines of his gospel, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

The Lord is with you — not because you are right, but because you are loved. Amen.