

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus be yours this Ash Wednesday and through the 40 days of Lent. The title for today’s sermon is ‘Repentance in Ashes’, looking at Judas and Jesus’ final words from the Gospel reading from St. Matthew, the 6th Chapter: “**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**”(Matthew 6:21) Let us pray... Amen.

Ash Wednesday; begins the season of Lent. During the 40 days of Lent, God’s baptized people reflect on the enormity of Jesus’ walk to the cross Calvary to save us sinner. It is a season of repentance, a season of turning from our sin to look to our Saviour’s completed work of salvation for us. It is a time when we as God’s people prepare with joy for the Christ’s death and Resurrection for all people. We put ash on our forehead as a very visible reminder of the consequence of sin. We are reminded again: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” But the ashes are not the end of our story, for they are formed in the shape of a cross, specifically Jesus’ cross. Christ from the cross declared; “It is finished” when He completed the payment for our sins, and by His death He sealed your salvation. While the ashes bring us back to our creation and ultimate return as a consequence of sin; The cross is the ultimate reminder of our salvation even from death and ashes.

The theme for the sermons in these mid-week Lenten services is: ‘They were there.’ They will shine some light on some of the less discussed people around Jesus Passion, those who witnessed Jesus life and ministry, and some who also witnessed His death and resurrection. Tonight we will walking a bit with Judas Iscariot.

Of all the people around Jesus, one of the most hated and despised is Judas. Peter had a quick tongue and was a coward, but he repented and went on to do great things in the name of Jesus. James and John had tempers and were selfish, but they too repented and went on to do great things in the name of Jesus. Thomas stubbornly doubted Jesus’ resurrection, but he too, when presented with the evidence, repented and went on to do great things in the name of Jesus. But Judas is different. He betrayed Jesus; Judas ratted Jesus’ location to the religious leaders; Judas led the soldiers to Jesus; Judas identified Jesus so Jesus would be arrested and Judas could claim the bounty on Jesus’ head. Could anyone be as bad as Judas?

But what else do we know about Judas? Well, he was one of the 12 disciples Jesus handpicked. He was the only disciple who did not have his origins in Galilee, as he was from Judah. He held a place of honour among the disciples as he was their treasurer. He also sat in the place of honour at the Last Supper. Yet, beyond those details, the Gospel writers are rather silent about Judas’ actions until he emerged as Jesus’ betrayer.

There are many theories for why Judas betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leaders. There are three main theories. The first is Judas was tired of waiting for Jesus to reveal Himself as the Messiah and deliverer of the nation of Israel from the hand of the Romans, so Judas tried to help things along, tried to force the confrontation, and in the glorious cause fight and kick out the Romans. In this way Judas would be more of a hero than a villain. Then there is the theory that Judas was upset because he thought Jesus was willing to sacrifice Himself not in battle with the Romans, but in an inglorious way at the hands of the Romans. Judas felt this was a betrayal of the disciples. Then the final theory is Judas was a pawn used by God to do His dirty work. But, all of these are simply speculation without any Scriptural support.

What Scripture does tell us, both in the Gospel of Luke and John, is that Satan entered Judas. Luke tells us; “**Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number**

of the twelve. ⁴ He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. ⁵ And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. ⁶ So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd.”(Luke 22:3-6) John elaborates saying “**During supper,**” that is the Last Supper, “**when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him,**”(John 13:2) “**So when Jesus had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.**” ²⁷ **Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him.**”(John 13:26-27) Judas seemed to have fallen for this course of action after a woman anointed Jesus’ feet with some very expensive ointment. Judas called her out and asked “**Why was this ointment not sold and the money given to the poor?**” Yet Judas’ motivations were not pure since “**He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.**”(John 12:6)

Judas had no excuse; he was guilty and responsible for his sin.

Judas was a thief willing to sell out his teacher and friend for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel reading highlight the problem Judas had and give us warning. Jesus said; “**Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,**” ²⁰ **but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.**” ²¹ **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**”(Matthew 6:19-21) Judas tried to build up, by whatever means possible, treasures on this earth for himself. He was even willing to steal from his friends and betray the life of his teacher for his earthly gain.

But the problem with earthly treasures is they rarely last and can vanish like the wind. Money does get stolen, respect can be lost, families do get broken, health is an illusion as life ends in dust and ashes.

But are we really all that much different than Judas. Now you may not be willing to steal from your friends or have a teacher killed, but to what lengths are you willing to go to protect your earthly treasures? What if they were seriously threatened? Would you be willing to sell out or betray your Lord and Saviour, and all He has done for you, to protect your money, respect, family, or your life?

Going back to Judas, God allowed Satan to enter Judas. Judas did betray Jesus. Then “**... when Judas,...., saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders,**” ⁴ **saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.”** They said, “**What is that to us? See to it yourself.**” ⁵ **And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself.**”(Matthew 27:3-5)

Judas tried to repent of his actions, as many people continue to try to repent of their sinful actions. They try to “**return to the Lord with all their heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning**”(Joel 2:12), but it never seems like it is enough. Judas seriously tried, even by giving the money back, but his actions could not be undone by his actions. He could not reconcile himself back to God. Judas’ attempts to repent led him in despair. Despair led him to a rope. The rope led him to a tree. On that tree, in a complete despair, Judas hung himself and he died.

Despite walking with, listening to, and watching all the teaching and miracles of Jesus, Judas refused to trust in his Teacher and Saviour. For the reason Jesus came was to save sinners, even ones as bad and wretched as Judas. Jesus came to put an end to the Law's demands and He made a new covenant in His blood to pay the price for our selfishness, our greed, our betrayals, and all our sins.

"For Christ, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."(Mark 10:45) **"He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."**(1 Peter 2:22-24) Jesus died just as much for Judas' sins as Jesus died for Peter's, John's, James' Thomas, yours and mine. **"For our sake God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."**(2 Corinthians 5:21)

Real repentance does not depend on us or our action, rather it is worked through us by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In Christ the LORD declares, **"Yet even now, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments."** Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."**(Joel 2:12-13)** Judas was not condemned to die because he betrayed Jesus, rather Judas was condemned by his own unfaithfulness and unbelief in the One sent to save him.

Scripture is clear, **"if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation, the full and complete payment, for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."**(John 2:1b-2) Repentance is a gift of God through Christ as Peter explains; **"God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."**(Acts 5:31) and, **"When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."**(Acts 11:18)

You see, I can't tell you why Judas did what he did; but what I can tell you is what Jesus did and why He did what He did cross. Jesus went to the cross to die in order to save us sinners. Jesus shed His holy and innocent blood to reconcile us back to God. Jesus body was broken to grant us healing and to exchange our sin and unrighteousness for His forgiveness and righteousness. Jesus proclaimed **"It is finished."** declaring the payment complete and our sins forgiven. Through Baptism we live our lives in the repentance and forgiveness of sins Jesus freely gives. At the foot of Jesus cross we see our salvation. Hanging on the cross we see our Saviour's love for us and all people and the length Jesus willing went to forgive us and save us. In Him we do repent in dust and ashes, but that is Christ working through us for the forgiveness of your sins and to carry you to the gift of eternal life in Him. Amen.

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