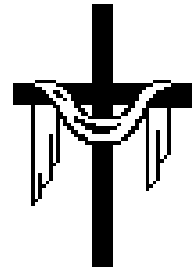


St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Ash Wednesday -- March 9th, 2011



Luke 22:1-6

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

John 12:4-6

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Dear Children of God,

The passion of Jesus Christ was all about people. Jesus suffered and died for all kinds of people. All kinds of people had a hand in his suffering and death. All kinds of people were there.

Now we gather again to ponder Jesus’ passion, culminating in his death and his resurrection. We will do so by looking closely at several people of the passion. We will ask you to put yourself in their places. Imagine that you are there—a part of the passion of Jesus Christ. See what that tells you about his sacrifice.

Today, we look at the infamous Judas Iscariot. We have questions: “How,” we ask, “could Judas be one of Jesus’ trusted disciples and then deliberately turn him over to his enemies to suffer and die? How could he do it? What can we learn from this man who was the devil’s pawn?”

Theme: People of the Passion – Judas, the Opportunist

- 1. Judas was a zealous and ambitious man**
- 1. Judas failed to understand Jesus’ ministry**
- 2. Judas lost the benefits of Jesus’ sacrifice**
- 4. Judas leaves lessons for us**

1. Judas was a zealous and ambitious man

From what we know of Judas Iscariot, we might call him Judas, the Opportunist. He appears to be one of those persons for whom everything came easily and who looked for an easy way to get everything. He could take charge of things. He was looking for the short road to fame and fortune.

When Judas joined with Jesus and the other disciples, he likely saw his opportunity to be in on the ground floor of something big. Imagine him thinking: “This Jesus is someone whose cause I can promote. Here may be the Jewish Messiah”—that is, the Messiah (as was commonly felt) who would emerge as a new world leader, a new king for a new era on earth.

Then came the miracles, the crowds of people, the growing numbers of regular followers. Judas saw some of Jesus’ power and glory. He was on the right track. He had a bright future with Jesus.

The other disciples welcomed Judas. They saw in him an able and prudent man and a good administrator. They made him the treasurer and manager of their common purse. He fit in well with the group and shared their zeal for Jesus' cause. The Jesus movement was under way for Judas, and everything looked promising.

Still, we wonder why Jesus ever let Judas become one of his closest disciples. He was the man who would do anything to satisfy his selfish ambitions. Why would Jesus take this political opportunist and potential traitor into his confidence and include him among his most intimate followers? Surely he knew what Judas would become.

Even so, keep two things in mind: One—the remarkable love and mercy of our Savior, who received Judas as his disciple. Jesus came to save sinners—all sinners—including all of his disciples. He opened the door of salvation wide for this opportunist, who, sadly, turned away from the opportunity and turned instead to the way of destruction.

Two—Judas had to be a person of the passion so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled. The psalmist (Ps 41:9) had predicted that the Messiah's close friend, who ate bread with him, would lift up his heel against him. Judas was that friend.

Still, it all started quite well. Judas was a zealous supporter of Jesus. He certainly was not the only disciple with flawed thinking at the start. How did he become so hostile?

2. Judas failed to understand Jesus' ministry

Ambition! Ambition had a heavy grip on Judas' heart. Imagine the disillusion he must have felt as, step-by-step, he saw his ambitions disappointed by Jesus himself. It could not have taken long for Judas to realize that Jesus had never once intended to establish a kingdom on this earth.

Things happened: John the Baptist was beheaded and not avenged. Instead, Jesus withdrew. A groundswell of people wanted to make Jesus a bread king, and again he withdrew. When the Pharisees challenged Jesus to show a sign of his authority, he didn't capitalize on the moment.

Instead, Jesus talked increasingly of shame and death. Jesus stressed more and more the moral and spiritual aspects of his kingdom. Near the end, several others of Jesus' followers began to fall away from him.

Judas saw it all with growing dismay. He did not necessarily hate Jesus, but he began to see him as a deluded failure with some mysterious but ill-used powers. He began to plan how he, Judas, could salvage something from the unhappy course of events.

Judas' spiritual life quickly deteriorated. He tottered on the brink and then fell into the beckoning abyss of hell. He tried to hold on to something, but having refused Jesus' teaching, he could clutch only the misdirected passion of his own soul. He fell.

At first he sought to satisfy his selfish desires by stealing from the treasury, taking money that was designated for the poor. He barely hid his real feelings when he scolded Mary for anointing Jesus with expensive perfume. He started looking for a way out that might profit him.

3. Judas lost the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice

At last Satan entered his heart, and Judas went to negotiate his nefarious deed. Jesus would fall. So much was certain. Why shouldn't Judas gain something from it?

So Judas went to the Jewish council and offered to deliver Jesus to them at an opportune time. With a good deal of disdain, they offered the traitor 30 pieces of silver, the exact value placed on an Israelite slave, to deliver Jesus. It wasn't much, but Judas was in no position to bargain. He took it. He sold his Lord Jesus, and his own soul, for the price of a common slave.

As you know, Judas never enjoyed the money. His faith had died, but not his conscience. Tormented by what he had done, he tried to return the money, but he did not look for Jesus. Jesus never left him, never denounced him, but Judas would not turn back to him. Jesus still had room for him, but he had no room for Judas. Hell had claimed him, and in despair—even before the verdict was passed to crucify Jesus—Judas plunged into eternity at the end of a rope.

As we look back, we see the tragic irony of Judas' case. Jesus offered everything Judas wanted, but Judas could not see it. Judas wanted fame, social approval, prestige. Jesus offered him lasting fame as one of the Twelve, the friendship of the angels, the love of God. Judas wanted a position worthy of his talents. Jesus offered to make him a child of God and a steward of the mysteries of God. Judas wanted security and wealth. Jesus offered him eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and the riches of heaven. Judas wanted Jesus, but only on his own terms.

4. Judas leaves lessons for us

We look back at Judas with sadness, not just because of what he did to Jesus but because of what he did to himself. We look back with some contempt, but I think that it soon disappears when we think of ourselves along with Judas.

Haven't we too had our moments when we stood where Judas once stood, on the brink of spiritual disaster with the storms of doubt shaking our very souls? Our personal passions and self-will tried to sweep us away from Jesus. But his voice called us back before we slipped and plunged headlong as Judas did. Can we forget how close we've come?

Even now we are not immune from the errors of Judas. We by nature are fixed on our earthly welfare. Health and prosperity, prestige and power are high on the list of blessings we want. And some of today's so-called evangelists even tell us we ought to expect those things from Jesus. We find it easy, like Judas, to want this world's benefits from Jesus, forgetting that he already has given us much more. Looking to earth, we ignore heaven.

However, by the grace of God, we leave the way of Judas for the way of Jesus. We have security: **“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Ro 8:31)**. We have peace: **“My peace I give you,” says Jesus (Jn 14:27)**. We have the strength of God on our side: **“I can do everything through [Christ] who gives me strength” (Php 4:13)**. We have love and comfort with Jesus.

Jesus died burdened with Judas' sin and with our sins. He suffered the punishment for Judas' sin and for our sins. He died in Judas' stead and in our stead. He paid the full cost of redemption for Judas and for us. But Judas got nothing because he refused to trust. We have everything—yes, everything—when we trust in Jesus. Amen.