

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Ash Wednesday – February 22nd, 2012

John 18:4-11

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” “I told you that I am he,” Jesus answered. “If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.”

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”

Dear Followers of the Cross,

You have taken special pains to be here today to begin another Lenten season. Perhaps you faced some challenges to get here. You may have altered your mealtime. The dishes may still be waiting for you when you get home. Perhaps you had to hurry to get everyone ready so you could get here on time. But you are here. It's good to be here for these special services. You have come to worship Jesus and to think again about his suffering and death. You have come to see his cross, and we want to sharpen that focus this Lenten season.

Today we turn our attention to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the darkness of a Judean night, a mob came to look for Jesus. They did not come to worship him but to arrest him. The disciples of Jesus were panic-stricken, and Peter drew his sword in a rash attempt to defend his Lord. Jesus' rebuke of Peter is as surprising as Jesus' healing of the wound Peter inflicted on Malchus. Peter needed to see the bigger picture. He needed to see the cross of Jesus. That's our task too this Lenten season.

Theme: See His Cross! Put Your Sword Away!

- 1. Jesus clearly saw his path to the cross.**
- 2. We need to see his cross clearly.**

The group that came to arrest Jesus included a detachment of soldiers and some minor officials of the Pharisees and chief priests. Of course, Judas was there; he was their guide. Because Jesus had often come to the garden with his disciples, Judas expected Jesus and his disciples to be there.

The men Judas led were not friendly. They were armed with weapons, torches, and lanterns. They looked more like a gang than an orderly group of men coming to discuss theology or even to carry out a court order to arrest Jesus. It appears they came ready for anything. If there was to be a fight with the disciples over the arrest, they were ready. They had the strength of numbers to do what was necessary, and they had weapons to subdue those without weapons.

Their plan was to arrest Jesus at all costs. They came at night so Jesus and the disciples could not expect help from the crowds. That's just as the Jewish leaders had planned it. If we had encountered such a group at night, we would have done everything to avoid them, perhaps even run away. But when they arrived, Jesus did not hide from them or run away.

Jesus did the unexpected. He advanced to meet them. From the garden, he could have seen them coming. The mob would have come from Jerusalem, and the torches and lanterns would have been visible coming from the city in the night. Jesus knew they were coming, and he knew what they wanted. He had told his disciples before these events took place. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus had taken his disciples aside and said, **“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”** (Mt 20:18,19). There was no question that Jesus knew why he had come to earth. He saw his cross clearly and resolutely embraced his mission.

So Jesus willingly submitted to the mob. But he wanted his disciples and us to know that he submitted to the arrest and was not a helpless victim of injustice. Jesus asked, **“Who is it you want?”** When they responded, **“Jesus of Nazareth,”** and Jesus announced, **“I am he,”** they drew back and fell to the ground. Why? Because Jesus had the power to resist. Against his power, their torches and weapons were useless. He chose to go along with this gang of thugs to meet death on the cross.

We have come to this place in order to seek Jesus of Nazareth. We should understand the reason we have come into God’s house today. It is to see clearly the cross of Jesus. Without the cross of Jesus, we are without hope, forgiveness, and life. Sadly, our situation without the cross is as clear as the apostle Paul wrote: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Ro 3:23). And there is no one—absolutely no natural human being—who can be excluded, **“There is no one righteous, not even one”** (Ro 3:10).

Even Isaiah, seven hundred years before the events in the garden, understood our natural situation, **“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way”** (Isa 53:6). We cannot find a way out of our situation. We cannot forge a solution to avoid sin, death, and judgment. Our dedication, our zeal to do good, even a lifetime of service are ineffectual. We needed someone to come and do what we could not do. We needed a substitute. We needed Jesus. We needed his death on a cross. Isaiah went on to write, **“The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** Paul also wrote that we are **“justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus”** (Ro 3:24).

Jesus knew what he had to do. He came willingly for that moment in the garden and for the moments that followed. He came because neither you nor I could appease God and gain peace and forgiveness. His cross has achieved it for us. Jesus saw it clearly. Let us also see his cross and understand what it means. Without the cross we have no forgiveness and no hope.

Jesus had tried to tell his disciples the necessity of his cross, but they had been slow to grasp its importance. Perhaps they thought they did not need the cross. Perhaps they were more concerned with just being disciples of this great man. Whatever the reason, Peter and the others did not see the cross.

2. We need to see his cross clearly.

Peter stood there with the other disciples in the garden that night. He was confused about what was happening. Peter had been confused about Jesus’ mission before. When Jesus told his disciples about the cross and the coming ordeal in Jerusalem, Peter rebuked him. Peter said, **“Never, Lord! . . . This shall never happen to you!”** (Mt 16:22). Peter wasn’t alone either. The disciples had resolved to come to Jerusalem with Jesus so that they might die with him (John 11:16). They did not understand. They did not see the importance of the cross.

Peter, of course, had boasted of his devotion to Jesus, claiming that he would rather die with Jesus than deny him. Then in the garden, faced with the reality of those armed with weapons and

lighting their way with torches and lanterns, Peter wanted to defend Jesus. He was moved to action in an attempt to prevent the arrest and crucifixion, which Jesus had told him and the others was coming.

Peter wanted to save Jesus. With sword in hand, he lashed out and struck one of the thugs sent to arrest Jesus. For Peter it was an act of courage against formidable odds. He had drawn blood for his Lord! The ear of Malchus proved Peter's brave resolve to die with Jesus rather than deny him.

But Peter had it all wrong. Jesus commanded Peter not to resist, **“Put away your sword!”** Salvation would not come by brave human effort in the face of overwhelming odds. Peter could not save Jesus. He couldn't even save himself. “Put away your sword!” made it as clear as it could be. Salvation would come only by the cross. Peter needed to see the Savior's cross and understand its significance.

Jesus didn't need force, one sword, a thousand swords, or any human effort to save humanity. He certainly didn't need anything Peter might do. And he doesn't need anything we might do either. It is his cross, and only his cross, that provides salvation. Peter could not achieve it even by his brave effort. Salvation does not come by any human effort, no matter how noble and brave.

Sometimes even Christians begin to lose focus on the cross of Jesus and become as blind as Peter. We lose sight of the cross when we think our status with God depends on us and on what we do. We might not strike out with a sword like Peter, but we take pride in our godly lives. Like the Pharisee in the temple, we think, “Thank God I'm not like others.” And then we list a long catalog of all we do for God, our neighbors, and our families.

Put away ideas that you can provide your own salvation by what you do. You and I stand before God only by grace and because of the cross of Jesus. See his cross clearly, and put away any thought that you can save yourself. “Put your sword away!” See his cross!

In another way, sometimes we think that the church depends on us and our efforts. We see how the church is treated poorly in this world, and we want to improve its image. We want to strike a blow to save the church and the image of our Savior. Then instead of proclaiming the message of the cross, we're tempted to proclaim another message we think will appeal to people and draw them in. Perhaps they will come if we just alter the message a little and give people what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear. We lose our focus on the cross of Jesus. Sometimes we want to hide the crucified Jesus and proclaim a more friendly and upbeat message. But then we rob the church of its essential message.

Perhaps the first question Jesus asked when the mob appeared is important for us too: **“Who is it you want?”** Did you come here seeking something other than Jesus crucified? The image of a bloody Savior crucified is not attractive to the world or even to our own sinful nature. The message of Christ crucified is foolishness to some. It is offensive to others. But it is God's wisdom to those who are saved. See his cross. Seek the blessings of that cross and put aside all your human effort. Put your sword away! See his cross! Amen.