

“Through the Eyes of Betrayal”
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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Mark 11:1-11; Mark 14:10-11

My name is Judas Iscariot – yes the very same – and I am here this morning to tell my side of the story. Many of you do not think I deserve a chance to share, but all of the others did. You even name your children after the others: like Peter, James, John, Paul, Luke, Mark, and Mary, just to name a few. But you don't name your children after me. I am the villain of history. I am the one you resign to oblivion except to curse me again during Holy Week each year. Is that because you fear me, hate me, or is it because you have an uneasy feeling that your sin may not be that different from mine?

Did you know that my name means “One who deserves to be praised?” That part did not work out too well, did it? But I had so hoped it would. I am called Judas Iscariot because I am from the town of Keriath about 25 miles south of Jerusalem. I was the only Judean in Jesus' inner circle. All the other disciples were from Galilee. That made Jesus' call to follow him so special. Yes, I answered his call to follow him. You don't think about that because you would rather think about the things I did wrong. I left home and family and business. I stayed with Jesus for three years, even when it was dangerous to follow him. I stayed with Jesus through it all. Have you done the same?

The other eleven recognized my ability and elected me treasurer of the group. Even at the Last Supper, I was reclining at Jesus' left – the place of highest honor. I had the ability, the potential, and the position among his followers. I was a zealous Jew who waited eagerly for the appearing of a Messiah who would restore our Promised Land to us. Our religion was completely intertwined with our patriotism. Rome occupied that God-given land, so many of us hoped that the Messiah would be one who could lead us in liberation. From the very first, I thought Jesus was that Messiah. He repeatedly taught, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand.” He sent us out to teach the same message. Jesus displayed incredible power, too. I once saw him feed 5,000 men plus women and children with five loaves of bread and two fish. And there were twelve baskets of leftovers! He calmed the sea just by speaking to it. He healed the sick, and even raised the dead! He had to be the Messiah. No one else could do these things. As he gained popularity, there were those who wanted to proclaim him King and restore the line of David on the throne. That was exciting because it was what I had hoped for all along.

But it didn't happen. After a while I began to realize that he was speaking of a spiritual kingdom. That disappointed me, and I began to be disillusioned with the whole movement. Even before he was sent to Pilate, he said several times, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” I just didn't get it. He had supernatural powers. He could speak and have a crowd in the palm of his hand. Yet he refused to use any of those things to restore the glory of Israel. In short, he was not turning out to be my kind of Messiah at all. Now before you heap a fresh dose of condemnation on me, think about the times you have tried to make Jesus what you wanted him to be. You love the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” but what about the times when he challenges your complacency, your selfishness, and calls upon you to commit your life to him and his church? I may have been a fool for missing the spiritual nature of Jesus' ministry, but don't point fingers at me. You have had almost 2,000 years of hindsight to learn from, and you still try to make Jesus into what you want him to be rather than accepting him for who he truly is.

Along with my disillusionment came a deterioration in my character. Self-interest became my motive. One step away from Jesus led to another until selfish and evil influences dominated my life. Taking money from the common treasury became commonplace for me.

Then came Palm Sunday, which you are commemorating today. And for a brief moment, I thought I might have been wrong about Jesus. Maybe he was the Messiah I was looking for! You recall Luke reported that there were those of us who “supposed that the Kingdom of God was to appear immediately.” We Zealots were ecstatic! People jumped and screamed, waved palm branches (the symbol of freedom – just as you would wave the flag), and even laid their clothing on the road before him. So many people from so many lands. It was like the whole world finally got it and were hailing him as their King! My heart was pounding. I was right all along. He was revealing himself as the new King!

But after he came into the city, do you know what he did? Nothing! He went to the Temple and looked around and then returned to Bethany. What a disappointment. It’s bad to have your hopes dashed, but much worse to be given new hope only to be disappointed again.

The events of the week that followed moved quickly. Much took place that I simply do not have time to share. I just want you to see how the pressure built up as the week went on until the situation became intolerable for me. Jesus cleansed the Temple, spiritualized our national shrine and called it his house. Man, were those Pharisees and Sadducees angry at him for that! But we didn’t like it either. That Temple was the heart of our nation and the promise of a future without Roman rule. Then he did something that shook us to our foundation: He predicted that the city and the Temple would be destroyed. That was heresy! Our whole system of thought was built on the premise that Jerusalem would be an eternal city.

All of this was overwhelming to me. I have searched my inner being over the centuries to determine just why I reacted as I did. Your scholars have speculated, too, but my motives remain an enigma. I just know how upset and impatient I was with the whole situation. Either Jesus was the Messiah or he wasn’t. If he was, perhaps I could force him to declare himself and rally the people to our great cause. If he was not the Messiah, then the sooner we could stop him, the better. I reasoned that if I turned him over to the Sanhedrin (the ruling Council of Israel), he would either assume his Messianic role or he would be imprisoned and silenced as an imposter.

There is one thing I want to make clear to you this morning: I was no pawn of history. I did what I did of my own free will. What I did was wrong. I made the decision to play traitor. You do remember what I did, don’t you? I went to the Chief Priests on the Sanhedrin and asked them what they would give me if I delivered Jesus to them. They immediately offered me 30 pieces of silver. I could easily have gotten more than that, but greed was not my motive. It was a win-win deal for me. Either I get a new King or walk off with 30 pieces of silver as my reward for getting the imposter off the street.

That night, Thursday, we met in a friend’s upstairs room with Jesus to celebrate the Passover. I had the place of highest honor, remember? I will never forget how he took on the role of the servant, since we didn’t have one that night, and washed our feet. He did it so lovingly. I wanted to just run away, but couldn’t. Something still pulled me to be with this man, Jesus. Then he said something that sent chills down my spine: “One of you will betray me.” Everyone was astonished and asked, “Is it I, Lord?” Jesus responded, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me.” I whispered

and asked Jesus, "Is it I, Master?" He simply and solemnly said, "You have said so." I left quickly. How did he know? How could he know?

I walked around Jerusalem for what seemed like hours. Then I went to the High Priests and told them it was time. They dispatched the Temple guard to follow me. We went to the Garden of Gethsemane. I know Jesus always went there after the meal to pray. The moonlight made the night seem almost like day. I went right up to him and said, "Hail, Master!" Then I kissed him, and do you remember what he called me? He called me "Friend." Even though he knew every dark and disappointing thing in my life, he still called me "Friend!" His love stung me, but it hurt me a lot more later. You see, I took everything in stride until I realized that they weren't going to just put him in jail. The high priests were out for blood. They wanted to kill him – crucify him! I never expected anything like that. He didn't deserve that.

What followed that night and the next day is almost too painful to think about. As I saw them involve Pilate, the Roman Procurator, and King Herod, I knew that his life was in jeopardy. That was more than my stone-cold heart could endure, so I went back to the high priests and flung their blood money on the floor. "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." And you know what? They didn't care! I had betrayed my Lord and had betrayed myself. In doing so, I had sent an innocent man to death. They had used me, and they didn't care!

As sad as all that is, the real tragedy is what might have been. I see now so clearly what I could not see then. If only...those words still stick in my throat. If only I had climbed Calvary and knelt at the foot of the cross. I now know he would have forgiven me, too. If only I had waited until the Resurrection and seen the risen Christ. I would have been welcomed back and become his forever. If only I had held out until Pentecost and felt the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, I could have been a part of the Apostolic Church. I could have told my conversion story in the early church as Paul did. I could have proclaimed the good news, written epistles, and had churches named after me. But I did none of those things, so now my name is despised by all generations.

It is too late for me but not yet too late for you. Some of you are living lives that are headed in the wrong direction. It isn't too late for you to turn around and follow Jesus. Some of you are on a determined self-destructive course. It isn't too late for you to affirm life and reaffirm your destiny. Some of you aren't taking seriously Christ's claim on your life. It isn't too late. Some of you in this room right now are betraying Christ by what you are doing and thus are betraying your highest and noblest self. It isn't too late to admit your sin, accept his forgiveness, and be renewed by the Spirit.

My greatest sin was not in betraying the Lord but in refusing his grace and his outstretched hand of love for me. That may be yours, too. No sin is unforgivable except your refusal to accept what Christ has already done for you. Refusing his grace and his love led to my destruction, and it will lead to yours.

What are you doing with your life this morning? What are you doing with Jesus Christ today? It's too late for me, but not too late for you...Still not too late for you...For you.