

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Sept. 1, 2024

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Sermon Title: Three Words in the Garden

Sermon Text: Matthew 26:47-56

Matt. 26:47 ¶ While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

Matt. 26:48 Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; seize him.”

Matt. 26:49 And he came up to Jesus at once and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” And he kissed him.

Matt. 26:50 Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you came to do.” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him.

Matt. 26:51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear.

Matt. 26:52 Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.

Matt. 26:53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?

Matt. 26:54 But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”

Matt. 26:55 At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me.

Matt. 26:56 But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled.

Main Point: Jesus Christ willingly submitted to betrayal, arrest, mockery, and death for the sake of fulfilling the Scriptures and saving his people.

Outline:

1. The Word to Judas (26:47-51)
2. The Word to Peter (26:52-54)
3. The Word to the Crowd (26:54-56)

Introduction

I don't know how long the average preacher ends up ministering, but let's do some quick math. I started preaching when I was 30 years old. Let's say I live past retirement age. Let's say I live to be 80 years old. That's 50 years of preaching, if the Lord is gracious to give me that many.

So that is at least 50 Christmas sermons and 50 easter sermons. That's if I preach a Christmas and Easter sermon every year, like most people expect. Think about this. How many times and how many ways can someone preach on the resurrection, or on the birth of Jesus? Well it's the sort of thing I try not to think about too much.

But here's the thing: I have already preached a lot of sermons on the death of Jesus. And I always want to improve as a preacher, but part of that sometimes means looking back and learning lessons. And as I look back at early sermons I preached on the death of Jesus, I notice just how fixated I tended to be on the blood and the gore and the suffering of the cross. In fact, the first sermon I remember preaching, I was very young – in my 20s, and it was just the goriest, most detailed sermon about what physically happens in crucifixion. In one sense, that sort of thing preaches so powerfully, of course. Who can hear about the suffering of Jesus without feeling moved by it – by feeling pity for this poor suffering man?

But look at the text itself – not necessarily today’s text, but the rest of the Gospels. The authors will tell us that something happened, but they aren’t *nearly* as fixated on the gory details as we sometimes are.

But look what Matthew is interested in: he is drawing our attention especially to the “why” of it all.

Why did Jesus do what he did? Why did he go forward? Why didn’t Jesus call the legions of angels? Why did he let them arrest him? Why didn’t he resist? And a text like today’s does help us to partially answer this question: not completely, but partially. He gives us something here today to go on. He really draws back the curtain in many ways.

So today we see that Jesus has three specific groups that he addresses here, each of them helping us to understand not just “what” is happening, but *why* it is happening. First, he speaks a word to Judas. Second, he speaks a word to Peter, who tries to stop the arrest. And then third, he speaks a word to the crowd that has come for him.

All of this is Jesus showing us that while we may not understand, and his disciples may not understand, and even the crowd may not understand, he at least is very clear on what is happening, and why it is happening.

1. The Word to Judas (26:47-51)

First, Jesus says a word to Judas.

Judas has previously agreed that he will provide two things to the chief priests: first, he will show them to where Jesus is on this night. And the second thing he’ll do is make sure to identify Jesus so they get the right man.

In exchange for this betrayal, Judas receives money. A few weeks ago we looked at the motivations of Judas. But I want to point out that the sin of Judas, according to the Gospel writers, is greed. He was known to steal from their money bag, and he seemed to be frequently looking for opportunities to pocket a little money here or there. What Judas does is, he seeks to benefit off of Jesus. He uses Jesus for his

own benefit. Instead of following Jesus for his own sake, he comes to Christ thinking, “what’s in it for me?” “What can I get from this arrangement?”

Now, you don’t have to think very far back in Matthew’s Gospel to remember someone who had the opposite attitude toward Jesus. Do you remember who it was? It was Mary. Lazarus’ sister, who broke the alabaster jar of perfume and anointed Jesus. Think about the difference in attitude between her and Judas. For him, Jesus is a means to an end: someone who will help him get what he wants in life. For Mary, Jesus *is* the end. What greater use could she be waiting to put this perfume to?

And so before we go very far, I think we already see an opportunity for us to confront our own hearts. Do we come to Jesus because of who he is, and what he deserves, or are we driven by a cost/benefit analysis where we’re constantly asking Jesus, “What have you done for me lately?” That sort of transactional religion is poisonous, as we see here with Judas. Because when the going gets tough, or when a greater opportunity comes along, if this was all about gaining stuff and having comforts, we bolt. And it shows up in some very insidious forms of religion in which people come to God because they think he will make them healthy and wealthy. And so as long as God keeps the gravy train running, they’ll keep riding it.

But a real disciple is willing to follow Jesus whether it means gaining or losing. We might prosper, in which case we say, “Praise God.” But we might also lose, in which case a disciple follows Job or the disciples by saying, “The Lord has given. The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Think of what happens here. As Judas approaches Jesus, he says something. He says, “Greetings, Rabbi!” He calls him Rabbi. No one else in Matthew’s gospel ever calls Jesus “Rabbi.” It’s a formal term for a teacher. What do the disciples *normally* call Jesus? To them, he is “Lord.”

To call Jesus Lord, and to mean it, is to indicate faith, and a submission to his authority. “I’m gonna listen to you. I’m gonna obey. You are the one in authority over me. You’re my Lord.”

Even in the way Judas approaches and talks to Jesus, we can see this lack of faith. At this point, all Jesus is to him is a teacher. He's not Lord. Certainly not his Lord. He's already cut that off and moved on.

Now, again as we go I'd just pause and take an opportunity here: you might say that you follow Jesus. The world is full of people who would say, "Yeah, Jesus is my home boy." "Jesus is my friend." "I like Jesus." "I admire Jesus." He is a teacher to them. They like his teachings. They like his lessons, his ethics, his morality and some of the things he emphasizes.

I'd just suggest this: Judas – long before he betrayed Jesus – had already rejected the idea that Jesus would ever be his sovereign or his Lord. Who knows what it is that has shaken Judas' willingness to submit to him. Perhaps it was Jesus' poverty. Perhaps it was the predictions of the cross. Whatever it was, Judas long ago decided that the cost of discipleship was too great, and so abandoned Jesus for money. You can see it in the way that Judas speaks about Jesus – the way he addresses Him here.

More opportunity to reflect: When you speak about Jesus, what do people hear? Do you love the Lord Jesus? Do you have a reverence for his name? Is it important to you that Jesus be spoken of with respect and love? When people use his name as a swear word, does it break your heart, even a little bit? Judas long ago stopped loving and reverencing the name of Jesus. To Judas, Jesus is only a teacher.

Jesus responds to him in a way that is gracious, and that grants him the liberty to follow through on his action: "Friend, do what you came to do." Tim Keller points out something interesting about this greeting. If you search for this word "friend" in the Gospels, here's how the word always gets used: it always gets used in Jesus' parables when someone is warning someone else. This is how people speak to someone they are warning that they're in spiritual danger. And here Jesus is, and he's talking to Judas like this. Even in the betrayal, it's like he's being told, "Now you are becoming one of those cautionary tales, Judas. You are now one of those people who needs to be warned."

Now, the answer to even this is what is coming next. Jesus, as he approaches the cross, is doing so even for people with weak and flagging faith. Maybe our faith is weak and failing. Jesus went to the cross for us. Maybe we feel like terrible

disciples; we're not living up to our calling, we feel like such disappointments, we're not nearly as dedicated as we thought we'd be by this point in our lives... there's just disappointment in ourselves. Jesus went to the cross for that, too. Even as Jesus speaks to Judas, he speaks with warning. It's like even in this moment, Jesus is holding out to him the offer he knows he won't accept: be warned. Repent. Turn from your sin. Judas may not follow the warning and the offer of grace, but he still needs to hear it. And so do we. If you can hear the warnings of God it's not too late to repent and return.

2. The Word to Peter (26:52-54)

Second, Jesus has a word for Peter here. In verse 51, one of the disciples has a sword and uses it. He strikes the servant of the high priest and cuts off his ear. John 18 tells us that the identity of the mysterious swordsman here is actually the Apostle Peter.

Peter draws his sword and uses it to defend Jesus, but Jesus is about to rebuke him. It's interesting that it's more important for him to address Peter than it is that he address the crowd that's coming after him. Jesus has a great concern for his people. He is more concerned that his own people understand and be corrected than it is for Jesus to instruct these unbelievers who have come to arrest him. His disciples are the priority. Judgment starts at the household of God.

Okay, so Jesus will address Peter. Let's talk about Peter, though. Why does Peter fundamentally draw the sword in the first place?

Let me give you at least one answer. Here it is: Peter misunderstands the substitutionary nature of the cross. Because here's what happens: Jesus has told his disciples repeatedly that he will be crucified and killed. He tells them that the Scripture predicts this and it must happen.

But Peter sees the cross as an obstacle. He doesn't understand that Jesus didn't come to invite judgment but to endure judgment. He came to bear judgment, not to bring judgment. Peter is trying to jump past the cross. Peter doesn't see that the cross is the destination. He doesn't see that unless Jesus dies, then he will never be cleansed or forgiven.

Peter does not see that he will never have peace with God unless Jesus endures the cross as his own substitute in his place. This idea of Jesus as a substitute is so important. Isaiah 53, when it predicted the cross, declared, "By his stripes we were healed." That's substitution. That is him taking our place. Without Christ as our substitute, the cross is just a torture device, and a terrible injustice. It's a living nightmare, but that's all it is. But Christ as a substitute? It totally transforms the cross.

But what does Paul say happened at the cross? He says that Jesus took our place. Look at 2 Corinthians 5:21, which says this: "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That's substitution. Jesus is going to the cross as a substitute in the place of his people: though he is sinless, he is going to the cross to stand in his peoples' place.

He made him who had no sin, to become sin for us. To become our sin. Who is that "us"? It's all of those who place their faith in the Lord Jesus. It is impossible to trust in the Lord Jesus to cover your sin and to not be redeemed by him.

If you would receive Jesus as your substitute, you need to see your sin, and you need to see Jesus. You need only trust in Christ, and if you do he will wash you clean. He will be your substitute. He will take your sin, and you will receive his righteousness. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow." That is the promise. "As far as the east is from the west so far as he driven our sin from us."

This invitation is open to you as long as you have breath in your lungs. "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." What an incredible and straightforward way that we can respond even right now: believe.

Here Jesus tells Peter, in essence, "You're trying to put a halt to my substitutionary death. Don't do that." Why?

Why is Peter getting in the way of this?

Here's part of the answer: Peter still has a very worldly, practical mindset here. He's never completely abandoned this idea that Jesus is setting up a worldly kingdom. He thinks the only way to safeguard Jesus' mission is if he safeguards *Jesus*.

But Jesus says to Peter, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

The problem here is not that Jesus is telling his followers they have to be full-on pacifists. That’s not what this is here. Many times in the gospels Jesus could have told people about the evils of physical force. The centurions – men who kill for a living – ask Jesus what they should do, and he tells them to make sure they are fair and don’t extort money from people. He could have told them to throw down their weapons, but he didn’t. Pacifism is not a priority for Jesus. On top of that, Paul says that civil authorities do bear the sword as ministers of God. So the point of Jesus’ speech is not to promote pacifism. In some ways the violence of the government is also a ministry of God. So this speech is not about wholesale rejecting all forms of violence, necessarily.

The problem here is Peter: he thinks the kingdom that Jesus is building is defended and spread by the sword. Or at least that it can be. He doesn’t yet know how grace and mercy and salvation and forgiveness happen. He thinks that the kingdom Jesus is building spreads by force.

Peter almost seems to be thinking here of a worldly kingdom that spreads the way that Islam ended up spreading. Peter thinks that the kingdom of Jesus will spread by force, and by power. That’s how Islam spread. Think of this: how did Islam spread?

It spread through force and conquest. It spread by territorial expansion and through war. And what stopped the spread of Islam? Ultimately it was the armies of Europe. Now, I am not saying that holy war is appropriate or inappropriate. But I am saying that Islam lived by the sword and was ultimately stopped by the sword. Massive Christian communities were wiped out with the spread of Islam, and forced to convert, die, or pay the poll tax. [Philip Jenkins’ book *The Lost History of Christianity* does an excellent job of telling those stories.] But this is not how the gospel of the kingdom of Christ spreads, according to Jesus here.

Now, think of the contrast. Think of Christianity: how does *it* spread? Does it spread by violence? Does it spread by conquest and threats? Well, I think the words of Jesus here are sufficient to say no, but read the book of Acts.

When do Jesus' followers ever convert someone at swordpoint? When do they ever threaten people, "Convert or die!" No. Instead, Christians are the ones at swordpoint. They are the ones under threat. They are the ones who find themselves imprisoned for preaching Christ. And yet even in their sufferings, they rejoice that they are found worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus' name.

You see, Christ teaches us to think in a fundamentally different way. The gospel spreads through persuasion; through the work of the Spirit, as people are told about and submit to the risen Christ. The Word of God is proclaimed, and the Spirit opens hearts to believe. There's no role for the sword in evangelism.

In Christianity, the sword and violence and threats are not how people are brought into the kingdom. Instead, people willingly bend the knee and recognize Jesus as Lord and follow him. They hear the call, and they come willingly and from the heart.

So pillaging and conquest and physical force are not the way that Jesus' kingdom spreads. Jesus says, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Now, I need to also mention very briefly that Jesus says one more thing: he says that Peter's plan of doing it the violent way is entirely within his power. He points out something amazing in verse 53: "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"

"Peter. You're quite well meaning, but I have better bodyguards than you if I wanted them to spring into action."

It's amazing because here Jesus is saying that behind his submission every step of the way has been this possibility that has always been there: he could have conquered by force with something far more powerful than just twelve men with little swords: he could have called upon the legions – the armies – of heaven.

When Jesus suffers then, it is never because he has no choice: he is always suffering because he is willing to suffer. He never suffers because he is constrained or forced to. He suffers because he honors the Father's plan. He honors the Father's decree. In fact, he honors the Scriptures. Because in verse 54 he adds

something else: “But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?”

The decree of God. The plan of God. All the substitutes and types and shadows that were laid down in the Scriptures. The centuries of prefigurations and promises... all of them have led up to this point.

What would it say about God if right here at the finish line Christ were to say, “Nevermind. We’re going to fight our way out!”

But Jesus says, “No. The cross has always been how the promise was going to be kept.” This is the word he has for Peter: make peace with my substitutionary atonement on your behalf. Make peace with my kingdom that is not of this world.

3. The Word for the Crowd (26:54-56)

Third today, Jesus has a word for the crowd.

Look what Jesus does. In verse 55 he rebukes the crowd. Here’s what he says:

“Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.”

The first thing that stands out: Jesus has never tried to hide from these men. He’s never avoided the possibility of arrest. He keeps belaboring this point: he’s not resisting. He’s not fighting back. He’s not running. And if he wanted to, there is no way any of them could stand against him. Yet he points out how they come after him with weapons, which they don’t even need.

So just notice that twice here – both in his speech to Peter and in his speech to the crowd – he has drawn attention to the Scriptures and said that they must be fulfilled. **The Scriptures are more effective at sending Jesus to the cross than any sword or club.** You show him a club or sword, he’s unmoved. Show him the scriptures, and he’ll march to the cross himself. For Jesus, the Scriptures are unbreakable. They cannot be ignored. They are the wisdom of God, the plan of God, the purpose of God. They are his daily food, his meat and drink. They are

everything to him, far more powerful than weapons or whips or restraints. Why? Because it's God's word. And because he loves its promises.

Think of what is going on here. This is the scariest moment of the disciples' lives so far. This is scarier than the storm on the sea of Galilee. This is scarier than the demoniac cutting himself among the tombs. This is scarier than anything they've ever seen. And we know this, because look what happens in verse 56. It says, "Then all the disciples left him and fled." That's never happened before.

Peter. The disciple who swore he would die before he would betray Jesus. He fled.

Simon the Zealot. A man who presumably was familiar with violence. He fled.

John. The disciple Jesus loved. He fled.

Every single one of them, with all their empty promises and certainty of just how dependable they thought they were. All of them failed.

The one disciple who doesn't flee is Judas his betrayer.

In the end, Jesus is standing in the garden surrounded by no one but his enemies. Every earthly friend he had, all fled and gone, and now he is all alone. And he never ran. He faced it like a man. Like the greatest man who ever lived. And he explained why he did it: because he tells them, the success of my mission does not depend upon how well I fight you off. The success of my mission demands that I suffer in the place of my people, just like God's word has been predicting for centuries. I have to keep God's promises. I have to.

All alone. But absolutely self-controlled.

There are so many things we could say. But perhaps this is the most important: he does not fight back, not because he was weak, but because he was strong. Not because he was a failure but because he loved the mission and decree of God. Because he loved you and me.

Let's pray.