

April 5, 2012
Questions for Lent and Easter

The Maundy Thursday Question
John 18:1-11

Opening Words: This is sermon number thirteen in my fifteen-part sermon series, *Questions for Lent and Easter*. Except for last night's message, each one of these questions came from the Gospel of John. Some the questions came from the lips of Jesus. Jesus asked twelve questions in the Gospel. Some of the questions came from the stories found in John. This evening's question comes from one of the stories and revolves around a well known character, Judas Iscariot.

On this Maundy Thursday, we are instructed from the eighteenth chapter of John. It is the beginning of the end. Jesus is being arrested and soon his trials will begin. The arresting soldiers are being led by Judas Iscariot, the most notorious traitor in the history of the world. This is the question we are going to answer this evening: what can we learn from Judas Iscariot? May God give you ears to hear these sacred words.

John 18:1-11 1 When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it.
2 Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. 3 So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.
4 Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?"
5 "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.
"I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) 6 When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.
7 Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?"
"Jesus of Nazareth," they said.
8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go." 9 This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me."
10 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.)
11 Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

From the very beginning he was destined for greatness. At the age of 14, he ran away from home to fight in the French and Indian War. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, he joined the American colonial army. He was given the rank of colonel and served with Ethan Allen. Together, they were given the credit for capturing Fort Ticonderoga. Later, he led 1000 men into Canada, where he fought in the battle of Quebec. His courage in battle won him a promotion to brigadier general. His future looked bright, and then something went horribly wrong. Thoughts of compromise ate away at his patriotic zeal. Soon, the unthinkable happened. He offered his services to the British, and in 1780 devised a plan to surrender West Point to them. You know his name, Benedict Arnold, the most notorious traitor in American history. This evening we come to remember the most notorious traitor in the history of the world, Judas Iscariot.

The scene is familiar. It is Thursday of Holy Week. Much has already happened, but there is still much to do. Jesus' earthly ministry is nearly complete. The Master finds himself in the middle of a political storm. He knows the outcome. He will be arrested and charged with blasphemy. His trial in front of his peers does not go well. His second trial does not go any better. He stood before the Roman governor, Pilate. This time he is charged with being an enemy of the state. The outcome is obvious. Jesus, the long awaited Messiah, the perfect one, the Son of God, will be found guilty and will be sentenced to die. I cannot say this too strongly. There is not much time left; every second must count. One of the things Jesus must do is assemble the disciples one more time for one for Seder. The Seder is a memorial to remember how God acted on behalf of the Hebrews in the past. Jesus will turn that traditional meal and make it something new. It is a living memorial created to connect all generations of believers back to Jesus. It is at this meal that Jesus brings up the topic of betrayal. One of the twelve is going to betray Jesus. You know his name. His name is Judas Iscariot, the most notorious traitor in the history of the world.

The disciples cannot believe their ears. Verse 22 says, *"They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, 'Surely not I, Lord?'"* It is not possible that one of them was going to betray Jesus. They had been through so much together. Jesus, himself, had hand selected the group. They had experienced so much together. They had sacrificed and ministered together. They had heard Jesus' teachings together. They had witnessed the miracles together. They had felt the power of the Master's presence together. They had dreamed of the future together. They could hardly believe it when Jesus identified Judas Iscariot as the traitor. They had even trusted him with their money.

Through the generations, people have wondered why Judas Iscariot did it. Biblical scholars tell us there may be as many as six reasons why Judas Iscariot did it.

1) Maybe Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus because he was the only non-Galilean? Iscariot is not a last name, it is a location. He was from Kaerrioth. Maybe he got tired and bitter from being the odd-man out?

2) Maybe Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus to save his own skin? He knew that in the political game of the day, the Romans were a safer bet.

3) Maybe Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus because of old-fashioned greed? He betrayed Jesus for about \$10,000 in today's money. What would you do this evening to make a quick \$10,000?

4) Maybe Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus because he grew to hate Jesus? He wasn't part of the inner circle. Peter, Andrew, James and John got more attention and were privy to more information. What made them better than him?

5) Maybe Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus because of his name? Iscariot was not just a derivative of the Hebrew Ish Kariot. It was also a form of the Greek word that meant "Dagger Bearer." Now the Dagger Bearers were a band of violent nationalists who were prepared to use every means available to them, including assassination, to free Palestine from Roman rule. Perhaps Judas had set his hopes on a Messiah who would deliver his people from his oppressors. And then in bitter disappointment he betrayed him.

6) Maybe Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus because he was hoping to force his hand? He saw the Master's power, but things were moving too slowly. He never intended for Jesus to die that day. Who wouldn't fight back when pushed into a corner? The problem is, Jesus didn't fight back. The Master had no interest in leading a political revolution.

Why did Judas Iscariot betray Jesus? We will never really know. The only thing we really know is that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus. That was not a wise choice. He lived to regret it. In the chapter beyond our reading, Matthew 27, we are told that Judas Iscariot regretted his choice to betray Jesus so much that he committed suicide; he hanged himself. Matthew 27:3-4 says once Jesus was handed over the Roman governor, Pilate, Judas Iscariot tried to return the money. The problem was, it was too late. According to the text, Judas Iscariot threw the money into the temple and left to hang himself. The authorities used the money to buy a plot for him to be buried.

So what can we learn from the most notorious traitor in the history of the world? Consider these four things. Maybe someday we will look at them in detail.

First, sin never delivers what it promises.

Second, it is possible to be near Christ and still not be truly saved.

Third, we are responsible for our own decisions.

Fourth, remorse is not the same as repentance.

If one of those four speaks to you, say, "**Amen!**"

One of the names almost lost in history is Rose O'Neal Greenhow. She lived near the White House in Washington DC during the Civil War. She cultivated friendships with the rich and powerful of her day. She knew presidents, senators and high-ranking military officers. They trusted her, so they shared some privileged information with her. Later, they were shocked to find out she was a Confederate spy. The Confederates used her information to defend Richmond, and they used that information to win the First Battle of Bull Run. Her story really is amazing. There is no nice way to say it. Rose O'Neal Greenhow was a traitor!

How close was Jesus' traitor? He was so close he dipped his fingers into the Master's bowl. Let us come to this Communion table not as traitors, but as the completely loyal.

Let us pray...