**Matthew 27:1-10 March 3, 2021**

**Witnesses on the Road to Gologtha II: Judas**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last week as we looked at our first witness on the road to Golgotha we saw a villain in the Passion story whose motivations were clear. He was focusing on his own religious authority since he was the current High Priest. Jesus was a threat to his power and so Jesus had to go. He could justify this killing on behalf of the entire Jewish nation, that someone had to take the fall and since Jesus was the one stirring up trouble, Jesus had to go, but really it was all about Caiaphas looking out for Caiaphas. He was a man who was willing to do anything, even kill an innocent man, to retain his place of authority.

We had the motivation. We had the backstory. We understood why he did the things he did. This is the case for many villains and bad guys that we find in movies, books, and television shows. A famous scene played out in many James Bond films is when the villain has our hero captured or in some kind of trap, and for some reason decides to explain why he’s doing the bad thing he plans to do. We learn all we need to from his speech. Sometimes the villain is trying to prove a point. Other times it’s for revenge on a past wrong. Sometimes, as quoted from the film, “The Dark Knight” there is no motivation, there is no reason, “Some men just want to watch the world burn.”

So where does our witness fall tonight? What is his motivation? Judas is the hated villain of the Passion, the betrayer, the one who we most easily recognize as the bad guy. But what can we learn about him, or from him, or truly, what can we learn about ourselves in looking at his life and his decisions?

The backstory on Judas is short. We know he kept the money for the disciples. We know that he sought out the chief priests and asked how much they would offer him to betray Jesus into their hands.  They gave him thirty pieces of silver in advance, and from that moment Judas began to look for the opportunity to keep his end of the bargain.  The opportunity presented itself to Judas after the Master and His disciples partook of the Passover meal, after the Lord instituted the Holy Supper.  While Judas went to summon the soldiers of the religious leaders of Jerusalem, Jesus took the disciples to the Mount of Olives to pray; and as Jesus completed His prayers, Judas led the soldiers into His presence.  And then, with a kiss, Judas signified that this was the One sought by the chief priests, scribes and elders.  Jesus was taken away and immediately stood trial before Caiaphas and the council.  Our text for this evening records a second meeting of the council, where Jesus was sentenced to death.

             But what then? It’s rather peculiar that when Judas sees that Jesus is condemned, he changes his mind and goes back to the chief priests and the elders. What did Judas think was going to happen?  Did he perhaps believe that the council would hear what Jesus had to say concerning Himself and be convinced finally of the power and wisdom, the Messianic nature of Jesus?  After all, Judas knew Jesus spoke with authority, and that preaching had brought many people to believe in Him.  Or did Judas perhaps believe that Jesus would work some sort of sign, maybe that He would miraculously deliver Himself from the power of those who would have their wicked way with Jesus?  As you know, Judas was also an eyewitness to the powerful signs and wonders Jesus performed among the people during His ministry—including a miraculous departure from Nazareth when the people there sought to kill him.  Or perhaps Judas felt he could force the hand of Jesus—by betraying Him, maybe that would force Jesus to deliver Israel from the clutches of Rome.  We get no speech though, no long detailed reason he does what he does. We know he felt remorse, we know he changed his mind, but not much else. Scripture is not clear as to the motives of Judas, nor is it clear what wrought his change of heart; but as the text explains, when Judas learned that Jesus was to be put to death, he felt remorse.

             What a strange and sad character this Judas is.  On the one hand, it’s easy to hold him in contempt.  After all, he was one of the hand-picked disciples.  He had spent three years with Jesus, watching Him perform signs and wonders, listening to Him as He preached the good news.  He was an eyewitness to everything Jesus said and did; but that did not instill in him any loyalty—or at least, not enough loyalty to keep him from betraying his Master and Savior.  He betrayed his beloved Teacher and Friend; and it’s all too easy to hold him in contempt for that.  On the other hand, it’s not all that hard to pity Judas, either.  Like a child who is caught in a lie, he’s not really sorry for what he’s done, but he does express remorse for the consequences.  It’s easy to pity him for that because we’ve all been there.  We’ve can sympathize, because we’ve all been caught with our hands in the cookie jar, so to speak.  And it’s easy to pity Judas because the high priest, who should have been concerned for his spiritual welfare, ignored his need for spiritual care.  In fact, those who should have been concerned for the state of his soul aided him in his sin.

             But the real reason to pity Judas is that he did not repent.  Repentance is remorse *combined with faith*, and Judas did not believe in the One who could give him forgiveness.  Instead he went to the wrong person to deal with his sin.  After three years, he should have known that he could find forgiveness and peace for his soul in Jesus—and only in Jesus.  Even then, as Jesus was facing the wrath of the council, Jesus would have spoken the Word of forgiveness to him.  Even then, when Jesus was on His way to Golgotha and the cross, Jesus would have welcomed him back into the fold.  Instead, he put his hope in the same people who bought his sinful services in the first place, men who hated Jesus more than they loved to tend to the needs of sinners.  When that inevitably failed, he tried to buy a measure of forgiveness and hope by throwing the blood money down in the Temple.  And when that failed to soothe his conscience, he hanged himself.  It’s so easy to pity Judas because we, too, find ourselves looking for comfort and hope in all the wrong places.  We look for comfort in our own works—as if our own works aren’t what got us into trouble in the first place.  We cannot earn forgiveness with our works.  We cannot buy comfort with our offerings.  We cannot find peace for our souls from earthly authorities.  Those things only lead to death.  Judas despaired and killed himself, separating himself from the Lord for all eternity.  That separation will be ours, too, if we die without faith in Christ.  We pity Judas just as we pity ourselves: as sinners in desperate need of a Savior.

             The ironic thing about Judas is that he spoke the answer, the place where he should have put his hope, without prompting from anyone else.  He said, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.”  It is in that very innocent blood of Jesus that sinners find hope and comfort and forgiveness.  Had Judas put his faith in the blood of Jesus rather than in his own works or in the evil-minded men who bought his betrayal, he would have found healing and cleansing for his soul.  What Judas did was necessary, but it could also be forgiven through repentance and faith in that holy blood which makes us clean and spotless before our heavenly Father.  This is your hope and comfort and peace as baptized children of God: the faith which you have received in Holy Baptism clings to Jesus and the forgiveness He won for you by shedding that innocent blood on the cross.  Once you could only able to feel the guilt of sin; but now the Lord blesses you with repentance—still carrying that remorse, but now also having that faith which clings to the forgiveness won by the spilling of that innocent blood.  Once your end would have been in that potter’s field with Judas, forever to be separated from the heavenly Father; but now, through Holy Baptism, you have been buried with Christ into death, so that, just as Jesus was raised from the dead, you are raised with Him into eternal life.  What’s more, Jesus gives you His holy and innocent blood along with His precious body to drink and to eat, so that your sins continue to be forgiven and you can return to your baptism.

             Who is the chief villain of the story? Caiaphas? Judas? Perhaps it’s time to look in the mirror, to see ourselves reflected in the Law of God and our own need for forgiveness. But rather than despairing, we find hope, where Judas failed and gave in to sadness, we find life and comfort in the forgiveness we receive from God’s loving hand. That’s the lesson to be learned, you are never past redemption, you are forgiven and loved by God.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.