



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“What’s It Going to Be?”**

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Palm Sunday, 2021

*“Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard.’ And when he come, he went up to him at once and said, ‘Rabbi!’*

*And he kissed him. And they laid hands on him and seized him”*  
(Mark 14:44-46).

Earlier in the evening, before His arrest, Jesus was eating with His disciples. He says to them, “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me.” They were saddened and one by one they asked him, ‘Is it I?’” There was only one other person at the table that night who knew exactly what Jesus was talking about— and that was Judas. The others were in the dark. And yet each of them asked the same fearful, guilty question: “Is it I?”

Behind that question is a terrible kind of self-knowledge, right? Each of them knew there was something deep in their hearts that could possibly grow into something horrible. Betray Jesus? God forbid. But who of us can know we would never do that? If the profit is high enough, or the cost of obedience is steep enough, we’re all capable of betraying Jesus. And so the disciples were humble about it. They knew themselves. They knew how fickle human nature can be, and how evil too, and they trembled.

Eighteen young men and women are being confirmed later today. They will take the same vows you all took one day. They will promise to renounce the devil, and all his works and all his ways. They will promise to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully. And they will promise to live according to the Word of God. They will promise to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the Christian faith. These are weighty words, but confirmation is one of those rare times in life when, before God and many others, you put your

faith on the line. You confess it, and pledge to stay true to it through thick and thin. How have you all been doing with *your* confirmation vows?

In the days and years ahead, there will be many opportunities for us all to betray Jesus. We will be tempted to sell Jesus out to gain approval from others, or to make life easier for ourselves, or to not make waves at work or at home. Judas did it for money.

If you would, have a look at the painting on the front cover. It's entitled "The Taking of Christ" by Caravaggio. What made Caravaggio famous, in part, was his use of light and darkness. There's very little light in this painting . . . no background, no garden, just a snapshot in time. He catches the moment of betrayal.

On the left is Mark in a full-blast panic fleeing for his life, his red cloak being held by one of the soldiers. Mark is a follower, a disciple of Jesus, as Caravaggio shows with their heads almost appearing as one. Mark, however, is tearing that kinship asunder. Judas is not joined at the head. He has just kissed Jesus to identify him for the soldiers. Judas doesn't look like a villain. He looks like a lot of Lutheran pastors I know. People are complicated, not so easily pegged as good or bad. In the painting Judas cannot seem to look Jesus in the eyes. And it appears he is also holding on to Jesus, though Jesus is making no effort to escape. Jesus is looking down, sad, his hands folded as if praying, but also in anguish. With humility he is accepting his fate; It is for this very reason He came (Jn. 12:27).

Dead center in the picture is the glint of steel on the arm of the arresting officer. We can only see his nose and a bit of his upper lip. Otherwise, he is a study in metal, an allegory of the State that can also be hard, metallic, harsh, unyielding, at times unjust. Jesus offers no resistance, but still he is met with overwhelming force, the cold shining armor contrasting with the defenseless Jesus. Beside that officer is another, older officer. In the back we can just make out the helmet of yet another soldier. We cannot see the eyes of any of these soldiers. They are anonymous and go about their business more like robots than men.

This leaves us with that mysterious figure in the upper right. He's holding a lantern. But who is he? Actually, we know who he is. It's Caravaggio! He's painted himself into a corner! Artists sometimes did that as a sort of wink to the viewers. Sometimes it served as an artistic signature. But I think there's something else going on here. There are seven individuals in this painting. We know how six of them are reacting to the betrayal, but we don't know how that guy in the upper right will react. He looks like he might be another disciple, but one who hasn't yet made up his mind. He's still gathering information. Will he also turn his back and flee? Or will he be true to Jesus and let the chips fall where they may, even unto death if necessary.

You can probably see yourself in all the characters of this painting, the one who flees, the one who betrays, the one who is betrayed, or the ones who are just following orders. But for now, see yourself in that mysterious fellow in the upper right-hand corner. That guy is you! Again and again, you will be put

into positions where you can choose to be faithful to Jesus, or to flee. To follow and obey or turn your backs on Him and betray Him. That guy is you counting the costs, considering the alternatives, weighing the options. Friends, what's it going to be?

You can let your light shine in the darkness, or put it under a bushel, and so betray Jesus. What's it going to be? You can speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of the poor and destitute, or you can be quiet as a mouse, and so betray them and Jesus. What's it going to be? You can throw your hat into the ring and put your faith on the line at work, school and in the community, or you can sit back and be idle critics of others who are trying to follow Him, albeit imperfectly. What's it going to be?

Every day, opportunities will come to live as Christ's redeemed child, or to betray Jesus. Borrowing from C.S. Lewis, we can betray Jesus in-between bites of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. You and I have done it for far less.

The guilt of what Judas has done eventually catches up with him. He grows despondent when he realizes how his betrayal of Jesus was leading directly to His crucifixion. If only he could turn the clock back and undo it. But he cannot. He tries to do what he can. He tries to take the thirty pieces of silver back to the temple and begs the priests to receive it back. They refuse. "What is that to us?" they say. They care nothing about the desperate and broken soul standing before them. One of the saddest verses in the Bible is surely this one: "And

throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, Judas departed and he went and hanged himself.”

If only he had fled to Jesus instead. If only he had run to the cross, he would have seen Jesus looking down on him and the others who had betrayed and crucified Him, and he would have heard Jesus say, as clear as day, “Father, forgive them.” If only Judas had received that forgiveness. If only Judas had fled to the One who promises never turn away anyone who comes to Him (Jn. 6:37). Instead, Judas took matters into his own hands and missed out on the amazing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

None of the other disciples did very well in the final twenty-four hours before Jesus’ death. But later, all are made whole. All are forgiven, reconciled, atoned. Jesus was ready to do that for Judas too, to give him his life back, restored, cleansed, and made new. But Judas talked himself out of that grace. He excluded himself from it.

Don’t you ever do that. Don’t ever talk yourself out of God’s grace. There is no sin so big or nasty that he cannot forgive it.

Judas never got to hear the words, “Your sins are forgiven” – but you did, earlier in the service.

Judas never experienced the amazing grace of the Father who welcomes His prodigal son home – but you can.

He never got to hear the resurrected Jesus say “Peace be with you” to his disciples in the upper room. But you can hear Him say that every week, right in this sanctuary.

Judas never got to taste the bread and wine, body and blood of the Lord on his tongue, thus assuring him of the forgiveness of sins – but you are about to.

Judas never got to live a life of forgiveness, freely receiving it from God and freely giving it to others – but we can.

He never got to see the Lord face to face in heaven, and feel his gentle touch wiping away the tears – but you will, because of the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.