

Ash Wednesday/Midweek 1 by Vicar David Spaude
Is It I? Sermon Text: Matthew 26:20-25 (NIV 1984)

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

²⁰ When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹ And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." ²² They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?" ²³ Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." ²⁵ Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you." *The Word of the Lord.*

In Old Testament times God summoned his people to Jerusalem three times per year in pilgrimage. They were to appear before the LORD at the three high festivals – Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. You know from the gospels that Jesus made that trip a few times, including one last time.

Today we begin our annual pilgrimage of sorts. Today, Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of our 40-day journey through the Passion History of our Lord visiting familiar places along the way and culminating with us gathered, in spirit, in the upper room, at the foot of the cross and at the entrance of the empty tomb.

Our Lenten series this year takes us to all of those familiar places and does so by using little phrases – phrases of only three words each – that focus our spiritual attention on what is true and important.

Today we begin our Lenten journey by looking at ourselves in the mirror – that is, reflecting on our sinfulness in the light of God’s Word, but then looking past our own reflection to see Jesus standing right there behind us. He is our Hope, our Cure and our dear Savior.

Tonight’s three word phrase to focus on is the question of the disciples which we make our own: **Is it I?** The answer is: **Yes – it is I whom God calls to repentance.** But more important: **Yes – it is I for whom the Savior willingly goes.** God will bless our Lenten journey through his Word!

In that upper room on Maundy Thursday, Jesus spoke many, many comforting truths to his disciples as he prepared them for the fierce trial of faith that they would undergo the next day – watching him, their teacher and Lord, hang in agony on the cross. But Jesus also dropped a couple of bombshells on his disciples that night.

One of them was this: While they were half-joking around about which one of them was the best of Jesus’ disciples, Jesus, the *Son of God*, quietly got up . . . and began to *wash their feet*, doing the work of a common household servant. I imagine it was pretty quiet all of a sudden; perhaps all they heard was the gentle splash of water in the bowl as each awaited his turn in ashamed silence. Sometimes actions speak louder than words, don’t they?

But then, a second, even bigger bombshell was this: As they began their last meal together, Jesus just said it: “I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.” Boom! . . . And more silence. Then troubled voices filled with concern and shock would say: “Is it I? Is it I? Is it I? Is it I?”

Is it I? . . .” And Judas had to ask of course too, otherwise his silence would have been too revealing; he knew how to cover his tracks as he asked, “Surely not I, Rabbi?”

What’s interesting about the way each disciple asked that question is that each was expecting Jesus to answer, “No, not you.” Yet Matthew says they all became very sad over Jesus’ revelation, and so the questions didn’t come from pride or self-confidence (“It couldn’t possibly be me!”). By this point, all the disciples knew that Jesus could read the hearts and minds of people, including theirs. These questions came from doubt and fear and each disciple was looking for reassurance.

But even asking the question “Is it I?” is revealing. What does it reveal? It reveals what sin has done to us and what sin has the potential to do to us. Although none of us here today is the one who actually betrayed the Lord Jesus to his enemies, each of us has sinned—day after day—and has felt the same fear and doubt the disciples felt. Along with the disciples, each of us cannot brag about how strong we are in our faith. Instead, we simply must realize how powerful a force sin is in our own lives and what awful potential for self-destruction sin brings with it. How could Judas do it? He had seen Jesus heal the sick. He had seen Jesus walk on water. He had seen Jesus feed thousands . . . and had even helped pick up the leftovers. He had been sent out as a missionary by Jesus and had preached the gospel. He had been given authority to do miracles himself—and probably did many. Jesus simply said, “It would be better for him if he had not been born,” How—how could Judas do it?

How can I do it? How can I do it—after I have heard God speak so clearly in his Word about right and wrong, about being holy in thought, actions, and speech? How can I do it—when I read many examples of people in the Bible and see examples today (perhaps, sadly, in my own family) of those who once believed but chose to turn away from Jesus? Do I really stop to think about what sin can do in my life? I mean, besides the problems and irritations it causes me or the frictions in personal relationships, do I really realize that it can *drive faith* from my heart and leave me to stand before God’s holy throne when I die with *no* excuse and an eternity of *hell* before me? As one professor emphatically said, “Sin isn’t like having a cold; it’s a terminal disease.” And every funeral we attend, every cemetery we drive past ought to remind us of that. This day too—Ash Wednesday—is a reminder of our own mortality and the judgment that will follow.

“Is it I?”—**Yes! It is I whom God calls to repentance**, for it is I who am sinful from birth, I who daily sin against my Lord. The letter of Hebrews says that God’s Word is sharp, like a sword, and reveals the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). Jesus’ announcement in the upper room did just that and forced the disciples to examine themselves. When they did—and when we do—what do we find? Grief, doubt, and fear when we honestly look at ourselves.

But in that upper room there is also Jesus. There, in the person of that God-man Jesus, is love we can’t understand. In love, he confronts us with our sin. But like a doctor diagnosing a disease, Jesus confronts us so that we stop living in denial or entertaining wild dreams about entering heaven because of our own goodness. He does it so that we turn to him, our only antidote to our poisonous sin, and are saved. Although his words reveal who we really are behind the façade that we so often put on, more important, his words also reveal who he is and why he came.

“The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him.” Almost a passing comment by Jesus in this text, but a statement loaded with love and comfort for us! He is “the Son of Man”—true man, yet true God. But by taking on our human nature, Jesus became our brother. He shares our humanity; he’s lived on planet Earth. He knows the temptations we face; he faced them all. He knows how we struggle in weakness; he chose to live in weakness too. He knows what grief and sorrow we carry around in our hearts. He knows how frightened by the future we become at times. And he knows all these things not simply because he is true God but because he is true man who experienced life in the sinful world just as we do.

And this Son of Man “will go just as it is written about him.” Matthew here in our text really isn’t highlighting the tragedy of Judas (although it certainly is a tragedy). Rather, this is Jesus’ story; it’s all about *him*—this story that began before the creation of the world. It’s the history of how *he*, the Son of God, created all things good in the beginning and how his enemy Satan declared war against *him* by corrupting mankind, the crown of his creation. In that garden, *he* stood with Adam and Eve. *He* cursed the serpent and then promised to make all things right again. Here *he* is—in the flesh and in the upper room. All the prophecies pointed to *him* and this night, this weekend. The final, hellish battle was about to commence. *He* “goes.”

He will go for you, for me, for all. Although later that night he wrestled in prayer and in fear with his Father about this battle, perfect love led him to go. He “goes” to the mock court, to Pilate’s hall, to the flogging post, through the streets of jeering Jerusalem, up gory Golgotha, onto the cross. He “goes” into the tomb of the dead.

But he will go out of the tomb too and tell his frightened followers: “*Do not be afraid*” (Mt 28:10). Then he will go to the right hand of God and rule all things for them—but also for you, his people. He will go as it was written and make all things right again.

Is this really for me? Is this work of Jesus that washes away my sins? Is forgiveness and peace really for me? Is a glorious future in heaven that he (who cannot lie) promises to me and to all who believe in him really for me? Yes, it is for you, it is for me. Put your faith in him! Whoever trusts in him will never be put to shame.

And walk with him—not just during these 40 days of Lent but every day. Fight the good fight of faith by the power of the Spirit—struggling against sin and clinging to your Savior. This is the truly Christian and blessed life. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.