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Matthew 26:20-25
IS IT I?

INI

All of us have favorite places that we like to go, places where we can get away and recharge our internal batteries. It might be a cottage or cabin up north where we can fish, hunt, play golf, ski or whatever we want. It might be a place like Washington, D.C. where we can visit the White House, Capitol, Smithsonian, and various memorials. It might be a place like New York City where we could see the nightlife and attend various Broadway shows. It might be hiking in the mountains. We are all different and have our favorite places.

My favorite time and place is right here in this season we call Lent. Every year we will go halfway around the world to a city called Jerusalem. We will visit a number of spots that were all very close in proximity. To be honest, they are not fun to watch. They all lead to the suffering and death of a man named Jesus. We will see a man betrayed, denied, arrested, rejected, beaten, and murdered. We will see a man forsaken by friends and foes, and even by his Father in heaven. We will see a man who takes the sin of the world upon himself and stays on an instrument of torture known as the cross so that you and I might have eternal life. It is a sad and yet happy story, because it does not end where most people think it will end. There is a tomb that will be empty on a Sunday morning and that changes everything.

The story is a familiar one that can be told in so many ways. I have had the privilege of sharing it for the past forty years in sermons. I have said many times that the Lenten season is like going into a diamond mine and picking up many gems of truth that apply to our lives and we can never exhaust it. We will look at places and people, but above all we are to focus on our Lord Jesus, the very Son of God, and his love for us. This year our series title is "Three Words of Truth." Every sermon will focus on three words that tell the Lenten story and the love of Jesus.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Ashes are a sign of death. They remind us of our own mortality. We will die and the reason for that is sin. "The wages of sin is death." Yes, we can look at people like Judas and ask, "Why would he betray Jesus?" We can look at Peter and ask, "Why would he deny Jesus?" We can look at Pontius Pilate and ask, "Why was he so cowardly?" We can look at the religious leaders of Israel and ask, "Why couldn't they see Jesus for who he was?" But above all, we must look at ourselves in the mirror of God's Word. We must see that the same sins that others committed are found in ourselves and we must see that there is only one cure, one hope, one Savior. This evening we ask the question: IS IT I? Yes, it is I whom the Lord calls to repentance and it is I for whom the Savior willingly goes.

We start in what is called the Upper Room. Jesus and his disciples would be celebrating the Passover. The Passover was the most important festival of the year for the Jewish people. It commemorated the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt. Every Jewish male was to appear in Jerusalem each year for that festival. This was going to be a very special Passover. The Passover would be fulfilled by Jesus' suffering and death, the blood of the very Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world. We would be freed from our slavery to sin, death, and the power of Satan.

Normally a servant would wash the feet of the disciples, but that evening there was no servant. None of the disciples would do this simple thing, because they all felt that they were better than the others. They argued about

which of them was the greatest. Who would sit at the places of honor next to our Lord? They couldn't be bothered with such menial tasks themselves.

Suddenly, our Lord got up, took off his outer garment, and got down on his hands and knees and began to wash the disciples' feet himself. They would not do this simple task, because they considered it to be beneath them, but our Lord Jesus would do it out of love. I would imagine that the room got very quiet as they all were ashamed by their actions, or lack of them.

And then would come a bombshell. As they began their last meal together, Jesus was troubled in spirit and said, "Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me." Wow! You could have heard a pin drop. And then very quietly, one by one, they began to ask Jesus the question: "Is it I, Lord? Is it I? Is it I?" Even Judas who knew that he was the one would ask the question. He still thought that Jesus didn't know.

"Is it I?" Each of the apostles was expecting that Jesus would answer, "No, you would never do such a thing!" At this point the apostles were not filled with pride or self-confidence. They were filled with grief that such a thing could happen. They knew that Jesus could read hearts. They knew that Jesus knew all things. They were prompted by fears and doubts. Could I possibly do such a thing?

They looked at their hearts in the mirror of God's Law and realized that they were indeed capable of doing such a thing. They looked at their time with Jesus. They knew how many times they had failed to trust him. They could see no possible answer when a crowd of 5000 people were hungry and there were only a few dinner rolls and pieces of fish. They could see no possible answer when they were on the Sea of Galilee and a violent storm arose. They could see no possible answer when Lazarus had died, and his body was in the grave for four days already. They could see no possible answer for the blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, the demon-possessed. And then they saw Jesus' answer to every one of those things and more. They all saw those things, even Judas. Judas had even been sent out as a missionary and preached the gospel. How could he do such a thing?

How could I do such a thing? We examine our hearts and look at what is there. We think of all the things that we have done in the past that fill us with shame. There is the greed, the lust, the envy, the hatred, the anger, the thoughtlessness, the lack of gratitude. Sometimes we may do a pretty good job of hiding these things from others. We can't hide them from ourselves and especially from God. There are sins that stick with us and there are sins that we have forgotten. Every now and then, we are reminded of something that we did or said in our past. We can't do anything about them now. We can't apologize to someone who is no longer here, but we are troubled.

The truth is that there is no sin of which we are not capable of committing. There are many shameful things that we have done and certainly thought. By the grace of God, there are some actual sins that we have not committed, but we are capable of them. We never want to give Satan an opening. We know what Peter would say and do later that evening as he would declare that he would never deny Jesus and he did so three times. We remember that Satan is first of all the tempter. He makes us believe that somehow some crazy thing is good for us, and when we buy his lies, he then accuses us telling us that God would never forgive us for what we did. He wants to convince us that we have no hope whatsoever.

Sin is not like having a cold. It is a disease and it is terminal. It always leads to death. A drive past cemeteries and funeral homes should convince us of that. We must realize our natural condition. On Ash Wednesday we are reminded that we are but dust, and to dust we will return. As we examine our hearts, we see that it is I. The Lord calls me to repentance. I sin, not just occasionally, but each and every day. I sin against God and I sin against my fellow man. I sin in my thoughts, my words, and my actions. I sin unknowingly and I sin, knowing very well what I am doing.

As we enter the Upper Room, we are called to repentance, knowing that we are guilty of sin. But we also see our Lord Jesus who loves us with a love that we can never fully comprehend. He confronts us with our sin and that is necessary. A doctor must tell us the truth. It does no good when we have cancer and he tells us to go home and take a couple of aspirin. He must attack the disease and sin is a fatal disease. It does us no good to think that it will go away by itself or that we can somehow reach a point where we can save ourselves. We are helpless. Jesus exposes the flimsy façade we want to hide behind. He points us to himself, who he is and why he came.

“The Son of Man goes as it is written of him.” Jesus is the Son of Man. He is both God and man in one being. He came from heaven and took on human flesh. He became our brother. Jesus was fully human. He knows what we face. This coming Sunday we study the temptation of our Lord. Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. Satan threw everything he had at our Lord. Yet Jesus did not sin. He did not succumb to Satan’s temptations, even for a second. The temptations that are so enticing to us never registered to our Lord. He understands exactly what we face because he faced the same things. He understands weakness and grief and sorrow. He knows what it is to feel alone and forsaken and cold and hungry. He experienced life in the same world that we do.

The Son of Man goes as it is written of him. This is the story of Jesus. God created the world, and everything was very good. Satan declared war against God and led our first parents to sin. Death came into the world. God promised that he would send a Savior who would crush the head of Satan. He promised that he would destroy the power of death. And here he is! He is here in the flesh and he is in the Upper room. The final battle is about to begin.

He will go for you, for me, for the world. There is too much at stake for Jesus to fail. Even though he would wrestle in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, he would drink the cup of his Father’s wrath upon sin. He would go to the sham court of Caiphas. He would go to Pilate’s palace. He would allow himself to be whipped, punched, and nailed to a tree. He would allow himself to be mocked and spit upon. He would go into a tomb, a place utterly foreign to the living God.

But he would go out of the tomb as well. He would tell his frightened followers: “Do not be afraid.” He will show them his hands, his feet, his side. He will assure them of his victory and their victory. He will ascend into heaven where he will rule all things. He will assure us that he will return and take us to be with him forever.

Jesus did this for you. Is it I? Yes, it is you for whom our Lord died. It is you whom the Lord Jesus has forgiven. It is you whom our Lord has prepared a place in heaven. Even if you were the only sinner on the face of the earth, it would have all been done for you. That is your hope and assurance. Whoever trusts in him will never be put to shame.

I am a sinner who cannot save himself. I am forgiven by Jesus’ perfect life, innocent suffering and death, and glorious resurrection. He is faithful. Trust him always! AMEN.

John 13:31-35

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

INI

I would like to start this evening by reading a part of a letter: "Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and they don't hesitate to honor widows; and they rescue the orphans who are being abused. The one who has gives to the one who lacks, without bragging about it. And when they meet a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as if he were a brother...And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food themselves, they will fast two or three days just so they can have something to share with the one lacking food. They observe the teachings of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God has commanded them."

This letter was written almost 1900 years ago, 100 years after Jesus had died and rose again from the dead. It was written to the Roman emperor Hadrian by a pagan philosopher who was trying to explain what Christianity was all about. Isn't that something? What a powerful testimony the early Christians gave about the hope that is ours. They didn't merely speak words, they showed their love in their actions. They not only talked the talk, but they walked the walk. The unbelieving Greeks and Romans would certainly notice. "See how they love one another!"

This evening we continue our study on Three Words of Truth. It is a simple message, but one that shows what the Christian faith is all about. LOVE ONE ANOTHER! These words came from the lips of our Savior Jesus on the very night he was betrayed. He knew what was going to happen. He knew what lay ahead in the next 24 hours. He would be betrayed, arrested, denied, forsaken, beaten, and crucified. And yet he thinks not of himself. He thinks of his followers. He commands them to love, because he is love. Jesus encourages us this evening to listen to him. We are to turn to him in repentance and faith, looking at our Lord who came here to show us love and leaves us here to live in love.

Have you ever asked yourself the simple question: What was the Son of God doing on earth? We know that he came here. We celebrate Christmas every year. We hear about his miraculous works and his teachings. He is the very Son of God. He lives in the bliss and glory of heaven, in unapproachable light. Heaven is a place where there is no pain, no sadness, no heartaches or heartbreaks. Why would Jesus leave that and come here?

We have to focus on who God is. He is the Holy One. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the Great I AM. We use words that we cannot comprehend: eternal, unchangeable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and holy. He is completely independent. He does not need us for his happiness. He did not need to create the world for some sense of fulfillment or purpose. He does not need us, let alone to become one of us and to live among us for a time.

This God is love. We confess in the Nicene Creed: "For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven..." Those follow earlier words: "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen..." God created the world, and all was good. Satan led our first parents to rebel against God and bring sin and death into the world. God did not hesitate. He already announced his plan of salvation in the Garden of Eden. He would send the Seed of the woman to crush the head of Satan. Since we were helpless to do anything, God would do everything himself.

I love Luther's great hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice." Verse five says: "He spoke to his beloved Son: 'Tis time to have compassion. Then go, bright Jewel of my crown, and bring mankind salvation. From sin and sorrow set them free; Slay bitter death for them that they may live for you forever."

A daunting task! There was only one candidate and that was the very Son of God. He would not shrink from this task. He knew the stakes and he knew what it would cost him. He would become "the man of sorrows, acquainted with

suffering.” He would be like a “sheep led to the slaughter, not opening his mouth.” He would be the “Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.” He came here for me, for you, for the world. By offering up his life he would bring glory to the Father and rescue us from death. He did not have to do what he did, but he did so out of love.

“This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” St. John and St. Paul knew that love so well. They experienced it in their lives again and again. They knew that God did not treat them as their sins deserved. John was an apostle. He had been with the Lord Jesus throughout his ministry. John had seen everything. He was the one apostle who stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified. He called himself the “disciple that Jesus loved.” He knew that firsthand. In his earlier days he was not the most patient person in the world. When a Samaritan village rejected Jesus, he and his brother James asked the Lord to call down fire from heaven to consume them. Jesus gave them the nickname “Boanerges, the sons of thunder.”

And then there was Paul. He wasn’t always known as that. His given name was Saul. He was a Pharisee who didn’t believe any of this “Jesus talk.” He thought that it was all a lie. He made it his mission in life to destroy this new religion known as Christianity. He was responsible for the death of many Christians. Then he met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. His life was changed. Not only would he become a Christian, but he would become the Lord’s apostle to the Gentiles, those people who were not Jewish. Both John and Paul would suffer many things for the name of Jesus.

Yet they knew that it was all worth it. They had learned of God’s love for them. The word is agape. This is no mere friendship. This is the greatest love, a love that exists for its own sake, a love that loves the unlovable, the very love of God for a fallen world that would rebel against him and reject him at every opportunity.

Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” That is unbelievable. Jesus calls us his friends. He would lay down his life for us. Who would sacrifice his own life for his worst enemy? Who would die for someone who hated him? Who would suffer things that we can’t even imagine for people who wanted him dead? Jesus, that’s who. The Lenten story puts Jesus in the spotlight and shows us the ultimate love of God.

Jesus would not only die; he would rise from the dead. We know that. Jesus would return to the Father. His victory was assured. Therefore, the apostles could trust in God, even though their hearts were troubled. They did not need to be afraid. All their sorrows would be turned to joy. Their sins would be forgiven. And so are yours! “Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven!” They are paid for in full by Jesus’ holy, precious blood.

So where do we go from here? We know that our ultimate destination is heaven, the place from which our Lord came and the place to which he returned to rule all things. But we aren’t there yet. The time will come, either when we die or the Lord returns in glory, but until then, we are still here in this evil world. What does Jesus call us to do? Love one another.

Jesus called it a new command. Was it really? Didn’t God tell us to love him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind? Didn’t he tell us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves? Yes, he did, but here is what makes this command “new.” We are to love “as I have loved you.” This is not Law motivation, but rather pure Gospel. There is no loving anyone or understanding what true love is apart from knowing what God has done for us through his Son.

“As I have loved you.” What words these are! What heights to shoot for! We want to love others as Jesus has loved us, putting us first, loving us above everything, doing what is best for us. “So, must you love one another.” It is not optional. As we look at our Lord’s life and what he did, so we must look at our own lives. Living our life in love is proof that we are Jesus’ own people. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

I have now reached the point in my life when I can say that I have seen five generations of many families. It is amazing how you will see so many of the same things in families. Children not only look like their parents and grandparents, but they walk and talk just like them as well. They learn how to treat other people. They watch how Mom and Dad speak to one another and how they speak of others. They imitate us. It is not always pretty to watch. We see that sometimes we might be good role models for our children and grandchildren, and other times we hang our heads in shame.

We know our sinful natures that are absorbed in self-love. We don't put others first or second. Sometimes they aren't even on the list. Judas was absorbed by self-love. He let greed take over his heart. He didn't understand Jesus' love, even as Jesus washed his feet, even as Jesus warned him about his upcoming actions. His self-love destroyed him eternally.

Loving one another as Jesus did for us is not easy. It is even more difficult as we look at the world in which we live. Our Savior said that in the last days, because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold. Do we really believe that we are not living in the last days? Don't we see the lack of love and concern by most of the world? Don't we see people constantly asking, "What's in it for me?" Aren't we tempted to ask that same question whenever we see a need? We want to limit our love. We want to love others, but only those who love us back, those who can do something for us.

God loves us. God has forgiven us. His love is always there. Even though we have sinned daily, even though we commit the same sins daily, he is there to assure us that we are his beloved, forgiven children. Every day he deals with us in mercy and grace. We must say with the Psalmist: "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?"

We cannot repay God's love. We can try to imitate it. We will fail, but we keep on trying. As we look at that letter from the pagan philosopher, wouldn't it be wonderful if he were speaking about us? I pray that reflects you. Love one another! AMEN.

Matthew 26:35-41

WATCH AND PRAY!

INI

Gardens can be beautiful things. In a few weeks, many will start planting their gardens for the spring and summer. Some will plant flowers, others will plant vegetables. They look forward to seeing the fruits of their labor. But they know that it is a lot of work. If one does not tend a garden properly, there will be all kinds of weeds that crop up next to the plants and flowers. It will not only look ugly, but the good stuff will be choked out.

And so it was in the Garden of Eden. Everything was perfect. Then Satan, the prince of darkness came with his lying tongue and poisoned everything. Death began to seep into all creation. Flowers began to wither; animals lost their tameness; fruit began to rot on the trees; insects began biting. Man tried to run away from God. He no longer wanted to visit with his Creator. Man began aging, and laboring, and sweating, and suffering, and dying. Yes, Adam and Eve lived a long time from our perspective, but they would eventually bend over and return to the dust from which they came. Their sin had deadly consequences. They were all too happy to listen to Satan. Well, by their actions, they and their descendants earned the right to do that forever, in hell.

This evening, we are in a different garden, the Garden of Gethsemane. A few days before this Jesus had ridden right past this garden as he entered Jerusalem on a donkey. It was a place Jesus and his disciples knew well. Jesus had often gone there to pray. This was a struggle that we can never begin to comprehend, a struggle that only Jesus could endure. Literally the weight of the world was upon him. Only he could do what needed to be done. He would have to take the sin of the world upon himself, into his own body. He would have to be forsaken by his Father in heaven, punished with the same hell that we deserve. He would have to endure it all. He would have to stay on the cross until every last sin committed by every last sinner was paid for in full. There was no backing out. Once he started it, he would have to complete it.

In Psalm 40, parts of which we just sang, the Son of God said about himself: "Here I am, I have come – it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart." Tonight, the same Son of God speaks to us from the Garden of Gethsemane and tells us three words of truth to sharpen our spiritual focus on our Lenten journey to Calvary: WATCH AND PRAY!

Most of us remember where we were the day the space shuttle Challenger exploded, and its crew died. It exploded shortly after liftoff and it happened because of one small piece of equipment, an O-ring, had failed. Often it doesn't take much to destroy something. Think of Smokey the Bear's warnings: "Only you can prevent forest fires!" All it takes is one match or lit cigarette.

In the Garden of Eden, it seemed so small. "Did God really say..." It seemed innocent, but we understand now exactly what Satan was doing. He would try to lead our first parents to doubt God's love and to doubt God's truthfulness. Perhaps God was envious of his new creation. Perhaps God did not want them to become his equal or even his superior. Satan offered a way to make that happen.

Ever since then, our human will has been in a constant battle with God's will. We love to use the first-person pronoun. Life is all about me and what I want. We see it every day in regard to our sexuality. I will love anyone I want! I will do anything I want! I will not accept any consequences of my actions! How dare you judge me! It covers more than sexuality. It covers every aspect of my life. We defiantly shake our fists at God and say: "My will be done! My will be done! And God, you will accept me on my terms!" That comes from our sinful nature. It is what we are born with. You see the defiant attitude of little children who will turn blue in the face, rather than listening to what their parents say.

Yes, this was Satan's sin, his arrogance, his desire to be as great if not greater than God. This is what got him thrown out of heaven and condemned to hell. And he wants the same for you and me, because misery loves company.

And now comes the second Adam, sent to do what the first Adam could not do. He must make everything right. He must obey the will of God. He must trust God's truthfulness and he must trust God's love. He must do the unthinkable, no matter how painful, no matter how gory, no matter how much it hurts his body, soul, and spirit.

Watch what it is going to cost him to do that! Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him into the garden and told them to watch. But watch what? Was he telling them to watch out for Judas who had gone out to betray him? Was he telling them to watch out for soldiers who would be coming after him? Certainly, they were to watch out for Satan's temptations, but was there something more than that? Yes, they were to watch him and try to understand what was going on.

Peter, James, and John had been with Jesus when he raised a little girl from the dead and gave her back to her parents. That was a wonderful thing. They were also with him on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus showed his heavenly glory and spoke with Moses and Elijah. It must have been spectacular. But the apostles were obsessed with glory and power and success. This was something different. Jesus would speak of bringing glory to his Father, but how would he accomplish that? He would do that by humbling himself unto death, even death on a cross. Yes, he would die a criminal's death, facing pain and scorn and rejection and hatred. He would bring glory to the Father by humble obedience.

We know the story of Christian martyrs in the early Church after our Lord ascended into heaven. They were arrested and tortured. They were brought to the Roman coliseum to die while the people cheered the entertainment. And yet they would die with joy on their lips, singing hymns and confessing their faith. They were going to heaven. This was not death, but rather the beginning of life, eternal life with God! The Romans didn't understand. But why then doesn't Jesus face his death the same way? He was so weakened that he could barely stand. He lay there face down to the ground under the burden that he was carrying. What does this mean?

This was no ordinary death. Jesus was asked to drink the cup of his Father's wrath upon sin. Imagine a cup filled with the most vile, putrid substances imaginable, a huge cup. Jesus was not only to take a sip, a sip that would make us vomit, merely smelling it, but he would have to drink the entire thing. There are sins so vile that we cannot imagine them. You will hear of things in the news that make your skin crawl. How could anyone do such horrible things? Multiply it by the billions of people who have lived on this earth and that is what Jesus faced. Drink it! Drain it! Every bit of it! There can be nothing left in that cup! You must drink it all!

But Jesus says, "Yet not as I will, but as you will!" Satan had returned to a garden to try his old tricks. We remember that when Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, we are told that Satan left him until an opportune time. Well, here it was! The temptation was there to escape the pain and embrace the glory! But Jesus would resist. He would do what needed to be done. He would do his Father's will.

And as Jesus would return to the apostles, they were sound asleep. Just an hour earlier Peter had promised, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." He would be with Jesus all the way. They assured Jesus that they could endure that same baptism of suffering that Jesus was about to undergo. Yet, here they were, sound asleep. These were fishermen who were used to staying up all night on the Sea of Galilee to make a living. But they weren't strong enough to stay awake even for an hour.

"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak!" We know that so well, don't we? We want to do what is right. We know what is right. We make promises to God and to ourselves that today will be different. But we are lazy. We fail to watch. We fail to pray. We fail to resist. We even play with fire and get badly burned.

The season of Lent is a time for spiritual discipline. Many people think of giving up chocolate or beer or something else. Others think that is a crazy idea. Lent is a time to watch and pray, to study the Word of God and see God's love for us. It is also a time when we are to look deep inside us and see our sinful nature, to see how totally helpless we are, to see why we needed Jesus to accomplish his mission of draining that cup of God's wrath upon sin, to go to the cross and stay there for you and for me.

We talk a lot about prayer, and rightly so! Jesus doesn't merely tell us here to "watch and pray," but "Pray so that you do not fall into temptation." Here our Lord Jesus isn't talking about asking God for blessings or praying for sick, loved ones or thanking God his blessings. Here he is telling us to pray for God to give us the strength to resist the temptations that will surely come our way.

We don't know when they are going to come. Satan doesn't call us to set up an appointment. We should know ourselves well enough to know that there are certain places and situations that we should avoid and sometimes we do. There are times that we think that we will have problems and we succumb. And there are other times when we think that we are strong like Peter did. Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh will attack us when we least expect it. We are not strong enough on our own. We are far too weak. We need God's help and protection. We need the Word of God. We need the Lord's Supper.

Luther's explanation of the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer states: "God's will is done when he breaks and defeats every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh, which try to prevent us from keeping God's name holy and letting his kingdom come. And God's will is done when he strengthens and keeps us firm in his Word and in the faith as long as we live." We are to cling to Christ and his cross. We pray that God's will be done not merely by us, but also and especially for us and in us.

We are weak, but Jesus is strong. He hears us and helps us. Watch and pray! AMEN.

John 18:3-9

I AM HE!

INI

There were times when our Lord Jesus kept his identity hidden for a while. When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, he would slowly draw her to understand that he was not some ordinary man. She would come to an awareness of her sin, and she would see that Jesus was indeed the one that she and others were waiting for. She said, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he." There were other times when Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. The time would come, but not now. Everything had to be the right time. God's plan of salvation would unfold just as God wanted it to.

And now the time had come! "Who is it you want?" The mob would reply, "Jesus of Nazareth!" Jesus would reply with three words of truth: "I AM HE!" With these three little words we will see that Jesus is the Almighty God, the humble Servant, and the faithful Shepherd.

What a night it had been already with so much more to come! Jesus and the apostles had celebrated the Passover meal in the Upper Room. He instituted the Lord's Supper. He had announced that one of the Twelve would betray him and the rest of them would deny him and run away. They would go to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus would wrestle in prayer as he struggled with drinking the cup of his Father's wrath upon sin. He would submit himself to his Father's will. "Not my will, but yours be done!"

And now would come a huge mob of people led by his traitorous disciple Judas: Roman soldiers, temple guards, Pharisees, servants, and probably some interested onlookers. They came with swords and clubs. They came with torches to hunt down this dangerous criminal known as Jesus who would probably try to run away in the cover of the night. Yes, they viewed Jesus as a dangerous man who had the potential to induce the crowds to riot. That might have happened if they had tried to arrest him in the middle of the day as he was teaching in the temple courts. "But this is your hour, when darkness reigns!" So, they came under the cover of the night, led by Judas.

Think about these words: "Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him..." This was not an educated guess. This was not the obvious conclusion that would be drawn from seeing the huge mob of people. Jesus knew everything. As the very Son of God, he knew all.

He knew all the people who were standing there, threatening him and attempting to arrest him. He could scan the faces of the crowd and tell you each person's name. He could tell you their family history, tracing the genealogy of every Jew back to Abraham and every Roman back to Noah. He could tell you where they came from: from Judea, from Rome, from Greece, from Egypt, from Spain, from wherever. He was God incarnate. He had created them all. And here they were, his handiwork, coming to arrest, abuse, mock, flog, and kill him. He knew all that was going to happen.

He spoke three little words: "I am he!" and by speaking those words knocked the entire mob to the ground. He showed the power that he had as the Son of God. This mob was not in charge. Jesus was. Jesus could have called down twelve legions of angels to fight for him, if he chose to do so. He had the power to resist. Jesus was the great I AM, the LORD God. He spoke many times of that power. I am the Light of the world! I am the Gate! I am the Good Shepherd! I am the Resurrection and the Life! I am the Way, the Truth and the Life! I am the Bread of Life! Only God could be those things and Jesus was every one of them.

Do you think that those in the crowd should have thought those things as they helplessly fell backward? They should have. This is the unbelievable thing that Jesus allowed himself to be taken captive. He would humbly submit himself to the Father's plan to buy us back from sin, death, and Satan. Everything would happen just as it was planned.

Jesus was the humble Servant prophesied in the Old Testament. We certainly don't want to think of ourselves as servants. We want to think of ourselves as masters of all that we survey, giving orders to everyone so that our will be done. We look to our own interests. We look out for what is best for us. And when we do so, we can see why we have so many problems in our relationships with God and with each other.

Judas was leading the mob. Here is selfishness and pride personified. Look carefully! If we ever think that we are pillars of strength incapable of turning away from Jesus or falling from faith, look deep into Judas' eyes and see what sin is capable of doing. It didn't happen overnight. Satan led Judas one step at a time, starting with a little theft of money and thinking he could get away with it. The desire for money kept growing in his heart. Finally, Satan snapped the trap and Judas was caught. His pride and greed would not let him go. Sin is a horrible addiction, a horrible slavery. We want to convince ourselves that we don't have a problem. St. Paul reminded us last Sunday: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

Everyone in the crowd came for his own reasons. They also came armed with weapons, thinking that they would encounter resistance. Jesus would fight, wouldn't he? Of course, he would, they thought. Anybody would put up a fight. If Jesus truly had the power to do miraculous things, who knows what he would try to do to get away? Even Peter thought that was the way to go. He drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Peter was already feeling bad about falling asleep in the garden. He had promised Jesus that he would be with him all the way. He would fight for Jesus, but Jesus would tell them to put away their swords. He would heal the servant whose name was Malchus.

Jesus just stood there calmly. "I am he!" Jesus was not going to have one of his disciples take the fall for him. It was a new moon. There were no lights in the garden. The mob needed to have the torches and lanterns to be able to see. Jesus could have changed his appearance so that no one recognized him. He could have miraculously disappeared and reappeared somewhere else. He could have walked right through the mob as he did when the people in his hometown of Nazareth wanted to throw him off a cliff. He could have called down an angel army from heaven. But he said, "I am he!" He said it twice. He would make sure that they took the right man.

That is why Jesus came into this world, to be our Savior. He came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many," He came "to humble himself and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

One of the great "I AM's" of Jesus is that he is the Good Shepherd. Listen to some of the things he tells us: "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know my sheep and my sheep know me...The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from my, but I lay it down of my own accord...My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." Could anyone else make such an astounding claim?

When Jesus was born, the shepherds of Bethlehem were outside, keeping watch over their flocks at night. They knew that there were always dangers threatening their sheep. Wolves and other predators were always on the prowl. If the shepherds were sleeping, their flocks could be attacked. They could lose some or even all of their flock. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He would not let that happen to his flock. In the darkness of Gethsemane, he was keeping watch over his flock at night.

"If you are looking for me, then let these men go!" This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me." The one that the mob came to arrest is the one giving the orders.

Jesus is watching out for his disciples. He was not only watching out for their physical safety. He was watching out for their spiritual safety as well. We know what Jesus would endure both before the cross and on it. The apostles loved their Lord. They had followed him for three years. They listened to his precious words of life. They saw him heal so

many people. They knew that he had done nothing wrong. How horrible would it have been for them to watch everything that would happen to Jesus in the next twenty hours or so. To watch the beatings and the scourgings and insults of every kind may have been too much for them. Jesus would spare them. He would go it alone and he would have to do that. The Scriptures tell us that. They would strike the shepherd and the sheep would be scattered. They would be scattered, but they would not be lost. Jesus would not lose any of those entrusted to his divine care. They would go, but they would be brought together again on Easter Sunday.

And there was still love for Judas, the one who was betraying his with a kiss. It was not too late for this sheep. Jesus still loved him. As Jesus would speak and the crowd would be knocked backward, Judas would fall as well. He would be reminded one last time who he was betraying. Sadly, Judas would not see his sin and repent. He would not return to the fold of his shepherd.

Jesus came for you. He is your shepherd, the one who called you by name at your baptism and knows everything about you. He laid down his life for you, drinking the cup of his Father's wrath upon sin, going the horrible way of the cross, being forsaken by his heavenly Father, suffering the punishment of hell itself, and staying there until every sin of yours was paid for in full by his holy, precious blood. He promised that no one will pluck you out of his hand. He promised you a place in heaven and promised that he will not lose you.

We have this great hope, not because of who we are or who we imagine ourselves to be. We are helpless sinners who need a Savior. That is why Jesus came. He is our hope, our peace, our joy. We don't have to look around. Jesus stands before us and says, "I am he!" He is the almighty God, the humble Servant, and the faithful Shepherd. Look to him alone! AMEN.

John 18:33-40

WHAT IS TRUTH?

INI

What is truth? Pick a story, any story. It really doesn't matter. You hear of something and you want to know more, so you go to the news. At 6:00 you listen to CNN and what their people say. Then at 7:00 you turn to Fox News and you hear something completely different. Are they covering the same story? Sometimes one network will spend almost an hour on a certain story and another network won't mention it at all. We hear a lot about fake news. We hear about Facebook and other social media refusing to accept certain stories. We see pictures being photoshopped. Things look realistic. Polls tell us how much someone is liked or disliked, but they never asked me. Sometimes, I don't know what to believe. What is truth?

Pontius Pilate asked that question. He probably wasn't a bitter cynic. He did, however, live in a world very similar to ours. There were all kinds of people with various philosophies and religions. He was a Roman man in a Jewish nation with a Greek language. He experienced every perspective. He didn't necessarily want the position he was put into. Perhaps he was being punished by being named governor of Judea. Perhaps it was going to be a steppingstone to something bigger and better. But he was stuck with it.

People were not going to like him, just because he was the Roman governor. The Jews were proud people. They didn't want the Romans there. This was their country, a country that supposedly God had promised to a man named Abraham. Pilate really didn't care about that. He was there to keep the people in line. There were some Jews who wanted rebellion. They were known as zealots. There would be occasional flareups, but generally things were pretty quiet.

There was one man named Jesus who came from a town in Galilee. There were all kinds of things being said about him by all kinds of people. Many people would say that he was the most wonderful, kindest, loving man that they had ever met. They claimed that he could do miraculous things that no one had ever done before. They claimed that he was the Messiah or Christ (whatever that meant). And then there were the Jewish religious leaders who hated him. This Jesus really got under their skin. It was no secret that those people wanted Jesus out of the way. Pilate was not a stupid man. He would have his spies out checking up on Jesus, making sure that Jesus was not a threat to the Roman government and secretly forming an army to lead a rebellion. They would report to Pilate that this Jesus might be somewhat misguided, but they didn't consider him to be a threat.

What is truth? We want the answer to that question as well, don't we? Even though Jesus doesn't directly answer Pilate's question, this text does indeed provide that answers we are looking for. WHAT IS TRUTH? Jesus isn't who people want him to be and Jesus is – thank God! – who he claims to be.

When you think about it, the arrest and trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin really wasn't so much about anything he had done. It was a trial in search of a crime. We know that there were people paid to bring charges against Jesus, yet not even two of them could agree on anything. That wasn't very encouraging. The Law of Moses demanded that every charge be substantiated by two or three witnesses. They had to at least pretend that the Law of Moses mattered, even though they violated many other aspects, like conducting the trial at night.

The real crux of that trial hinged on who Jesus said he was. The opposition to Jesus had started long before this. The people were ready to stone him to death for blasphemy for claiming to be God when Jesus said, "Before Abraham was born, I am." Oh, yes, they tried to bring a charge against Jesus with his claim of destroying the temple and rebuilding

it in three days, but that went nowhere. Jesus was, of course, speaking of his body that would be raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. Just as Pilate wasn't stupid, Caiphas the High Priest, wasn't either. He would get to the very heart of the matter. He would put Jesus under oath and ask him point blank: "Are you, in fact, the Son of the Blessed One? Tell us!" And Jesus would respond, "Yes, it is as you say!"

The Jewish leaders didn't need any more witnesses or any more testimony. They had him now! Yet they had one problem. They did not have the authority to put Jesus to death. For that they needed Pontius Pilate. They hated to do it, but it was necessary. They couldn't bring charges of blasphemy against Jesus. Pilate would simply laugh and go back to sleep. They would have to charge him with treason and sedition, trying to set up some sort of alternate kingdom. Pilate would have to investigate that. But as Pilate saw Jesus, humble, bound, beaten and bruised, yet quiet and peaceful, he couldn't believe that Jesus was a king. "You are a king, then!" Really?

Both Pilate and Jesus' accusers had this in common: Jesus wasn't who they expected him to be and he wasn't who they wanted him to be. It would have been so much easier for Pilate if Jesus really was a revolutionary. He could then have him executed with a clear and free conscience. But this man didn't look or act like a king. Something just wasn't right. Both Pilate and his wife were troubled. They knew this man was innocent of any wrongdoing. Pilate would ultimately go against his conscience to save his own skin and have Jesus executed. He would put a sign on the cross, "The King of the Jews," which may have been a jab at the Sanhedrin or a joke on Jesus.

As far as the Jewish people calling for the death of Jesus and the release of Barabbas, a notorious murderer, this was truly sad. John began his Gospel telling us: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." Jesus had told his disciples and the crowds that he was not the kind of king they were looking for. His Bread of Life discourse drove many away as they realized that Jesus was not going to be their bread king, giving them all the earthly blessings their hearts desired. Satan had thrown out that temptation to our Lord in the wilderness to take the glory and skip the suffering. Satan was fine with Jesus having an earthly kingdom. He could not allow Jesus to complete his heavenly mission. Yes, many in Israel were looking for the next and greater King David who would once again restore Israel to former and even greater heights. Some wanted someone who would drain the worship swamp of its corruption. But they felt that Jesus couldn't possibly be who he claimed to be.

Many people today want Jesus to be someone else. Some want Jesus to be the social activist, fighting for what they perceive as justice for oppressed minorities. Others want Jesus to be their financial planner, helping them make good decisions so that they can be wealthy. Some want Jesus to run the governments of this world. He could certainly do a better job than what we have. And there are others who want him to be loving (according to their definition), never judging anyone for a lifestyle contrary to God's Word. How about a teacher and great moral example? But what is the truth?

We want to create our own truth. We want to convince ourselves that something is true because we believe that it is, whether there are any facts to back it up or not. We can say, "It's truth for me, and that's all that matters!"

Before Pilate stood one who was not merely truthful or a truth, but the one who was "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." It doesn't matter whether you accept him for who he is. It does not change the fact that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

This Word, the Bible, is truth as well. God gave it to us because Satan is the prince of lies. He never stops lying, telling half-truths, twisting words, giving the ultimate "fake news." He did it with Adam and Eve. He did it with the nation

of Israel. He did it in every country, in every culture, in every era, and he continues to do the same today. God tells us what is true, and he starts and ends with his Son, the Truth.

What is truth? Jesus of Nazareth is exactly who he claimed to be. He made that claim over and over again. He is the eternal God. Once again, we look at the great "I AM" statements of Jesus. "I am the Resurrection and the Life." "I am the Bread of Life." "I am the Light of the world." "I am the Good Shepherd." "Before Abraham was born, I am." You couldn't make those statements. I couldn't make those statements, but Jesus could because they are true.

Jesus came from a kingdom of truth. This is a kingdom that operates in a completely different way from the kingdoms of this world. In this kingdom the last are first and the first are last. Jesus would humble himself and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross. No job was too insignificant for this Divine Servant. He would wash his disciples' feet. He would be silent before the lies and unjust accusations of his enemies. He would set aside his divine power to punish those who were mocking and torturing him. He would perfectly obey everything his Father had commanded. He would faithfully carry out everything the Father had given him to do. Nothing would be lacking. He was our Substitute.

Why did he do all this? Because the wages of sin is death. Because there was no way for us to save ourselves. We did not possess the perfect righteousness that God's Law demanded from us. We had sinned against God and against our fellow man. God says that we can have no sin in us. If God, is indeed a God of perfect justice, then he must punish the guilty. But Jesus would be our Substitute. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ. Jesus took our sins and went to the cross, rejected by the world and rejected by his Father, as he took our sin and guilt. That is truth! He died for me. He died for you. He died for the world.

This is truth. Jesus is not what we want. He is what we need. We don't need him to be a social justice advocate or financial planner or even a nice guy who makes us feel good about ourselves. We need a Savior who will rescue us from our slavery to sin, death, and the power of Satan. We need one who will crush the head of Satan. We need one who will destroy the power of death. Here he stands, in Pilate's hall, the who is the Truth, the Son of God and the Son of Man. The crowds will make the wrong choice. They will cheer to release Barabbas, and Jesus will go to do what he came to do, the very meaning of his name. He will save his people from their sins.

Do you want that truth, a truth that might hurt us as we look at our sins that we don't want to confess and give up? Or would you rather listen to Satan's lies and make up your own truth as you go along? Like the Sanhedrin, like Pilate, like the mob, we have that choice. Jesus says, "Whoever believes in me shall not perish but have eternal life!" That is truth! AMEN.

John 19:14-18

TAKE HIM AWAY!

INI

“Take him away! Get him out of here! He’s a bum! We don’t want him anymore!” Harsh words! They show how quickly one can fall out of favor with the crowd. A couple of years ago, many people in Detroit were saying that about Justin Verlander, the star pitcher for the Detroit Tigers. He was a great pitcher, winning many games and many awards. The Tigers weren’t doing as well as they had in the past when they were in the playoffs and World Series. Justin had some problems with injuries and his fastball was a little slower than it had been. People wanted him out. They didn’t care what the Tigers got for him. He had been a great pitcher and a great person in the community. He had no problems with drugs or other things. Many people just wanted him gone for whatever reason. He got traded to Houston and won them the World Series. He just got a raise to \$33 million per year. I think that he could still help the Tigers.

People can fall out of favor with the mob very quickly. It can happen overnight. Athletes, politicians, personalities, heads of corporations. Just one mistake and people will turn on you. We love to build people up so that we can tear them down. Was there anyone who fell faster than our Lord and Savior Jesus? On the Sunday before, he entered Jerusalem, being acclaimed as the Son of David. By Friday morning, the crowds were screaming, “Take him away! Crucify him!”

The prophet Isaiah had told us that it would happen: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Jesus had foretold that he would go to Jerusalem where he would be handed over to the Gentiles and crucified. And now it was taking place!

It had to be a raucous crowd that Friday morning as the crowd was getting into it. Jesus had been arrested in the middle of the night, brought to trial before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, and handed over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. The people demanded Jesus’ death by crucifixion, as a common criminal. Even though Pilate saw Jesus as innocent, he would acquiesce to the crowd’s demands.

During these midweek Lenten services, we have been focusing on Jesus’ passion leading up to his crucifixion. This is the final farewell the people of Jerusalem, the city of peace gave to him, shouts of anger and hatred: “Take him away! Crucify him!” Satan was certainly hard at work among the people, stirring them on to that decision. But God was also at work that day, accomplishing his purpose. We have these three words of truth: TAKE HIM AWAY! to leave the crowd behind to its cravings and to move forward the Father’s gracious plan.

It seems crazy. Why was the crowd so bloodthirsty? Why did they want Jesus to die! What had Jesus done besides heal the sick, give sight to the blind, make the lame walk, drive out demons, feed the multitudes, raise the dead, and teach the people the correct understanding of the Scriptures so that the people could understand the message of Moses and the prophets? Could we say that these were evil things? But this is exactly what Jesus was speaking about when he had told his apostles earlier that evening: “They hated me without reason.”

There are people who say and honestly believe that we are all good by nature. Doing evil is only something that a person learns somewhere along the way. Sadly, we are all born with a sinful nature that looks out only for ourselves. Parents don’t teach their children to hit each other and call them names or demand that they get what they want when they go to the store with Mom or Dad.

Here in the crowd of Jerusalem, we see what the sinful mind is capable of. "The sinful mind is hostile to God!" We want nothing to do with God. We rebel against him and want him out of our lives. We don't want God telling us or even suggesting to us that our lifestyle is wrong and should be changed. We want to do what we want to do. On that day, whether you were Jew or Gentile, you wanted the same thing. You wanted Jesus gone, out of the way, dead, so that he would no longer bother you!

Jesus would pick up his own cross and leave the people to their cravings. What were they craving? They were craving Jesus' blood, but why? The Jewish religious leaders who led the mob wanted him dead because they saw Jesus as a threat to their peace, security, and prosperity. Even though they were now under Roman rule, they enjoyed a cozy relationship with the Romans. The Romans would leave them alone as far as their worship life was concerned. They were able to make money, lots of money, from selling animals in the temple, raising the price, and gouging the people. Supply and demand! Jesus had driven out the money changers in the temple twice. He had done it just a few days before this. They didn't want Jesus threatening their prosperity.

They may have been the religious leaders, but they certainly weren't godly. That didn't matter to them. They wanted power and control of the people. They had it and they didn't intend to lose it. They would say, "We have no king but Caesar." Within forty years Caesar would have his armies attack the city of Jerusalem, kill thousands, and destroy the temple. Yes, the city would be destroyed. The Jews would be driven out of their holy city and banished. How ironic! This was the time of Passover, the greatest festival of the people, the festival that celebrated their freedom as God led his people out of slavery in Egypt. But here, as they demanded the death of the Son of God, they pledged themselves to return to slavery.

We are naturally slaves to sin. For all that we talk about freedom, we crave being slaves. We see the horrible power of addiction in people's lives: addictions to alcohol and other drugs, addictions to gambling, addictions to sex, addictions to power, money, food, you name it. Even though people know that they are addicted, they try to deny it and say that they are in total control. Our natural focus is not on God and eternal life. We are here in this world and we will try to make this world our heaven. I went to Opening Day last week. Many people were partying already at 6:00 in the morning. By the time the game started at 1:00 they were pretty wasted. They will tell you that they had a great time and can't wait to have an excuse to do it again. When Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me," Satan will say, "What kind of life is that? How dare Jesus say such a thing? Take him away!"

I don't know if you have ever seen a mob in person. It is a scary thing. You have a few people leading it and people will join right in, doing things that they might not do regularly because they don't want to get arrested. But if everybody else is doing it, they feel no regrets. They are happy to do it. It shows our sinful nature at its worst. Perhaps many in Jerusalem did not think of calling for Jesus' death when the day first began, but if everyone else was doing it, it must be something good.

Thankfully, our salvation does not depend, even a tiny bit, on our devotion, our zeal, our commitment to follow Christ. None of us would make it. It all depends upon him, his devotion, his zeal, his commitment, to fulfill his Father's plans for our eternity.

Jesus would take up his cross and quietly go to Calvary where they would crucify him. He would leave the mob to their bloodthirsty cravings, but he would move forward the Father's gracious plan. This is what he came to do. It was the time of the Passover. God had told the Israelites to take the blood of an innocent, spotless lamb, and put it on the doorframes of their homes. When the angel of death came to the homes of Egypt, he would pass over any homes that

were marked with the blood of the lamb. We know that the Israelites were not any less sinful than the Egyptians, but God had called this people to be his own. God would deliver his people from death.

An even greater deliverance was happening at Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Here was once again blood, but it was better blood, holy blood, the very blood of God. Here was the blood of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Here was blood that cleanses and covers your sins, blood that gives us the righteousness that we need to stand before God. Through this blood, we have the forgiveness of sins. God has taken them out of his sight.

As we trust in this blood, shed on the cross, we have a glorious future awaiting us. St. John beautifully writes in his Revelation from Jesus Christ: "These in white robes – who are they?" the elder asked. John answered, "You know." "Yes, these are they who are coming out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple."

This is what Jesus was carrying as he took his cross outside the city to suffer, to die for you and me. Jesus would not let anything deter him. He would carry out his Father's plan. He would drink the cup of wrath upon the sin of the world. He would shed his innocent blood and die, and he would rise again.

On his first missionary journey, the Apostle Paul stopped at a synagogue in what is present day Turkey. He would go to the synagogue first to explain to the people who Jesus was and why he came. He told them, "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath." This was God's plan to reestablish peace with him.

"Take him away!" I'm glad that I was not there on that Good Friday. Knowing my sinful nature, I may well have joined with the crowd. The crowd did get its wish. Jesus would be taken away and they would never see him again. Following his resurrection Jesus made a number of appearances, but only to those who believed in him, even those with a very weak faith. He never appeared to the crowds. What a horrible judgment!

We now move on to Holy Week! We see everything carried out to complete God's plan. Jesus would suffer, he would die, and he would rise again! May God be with us! AMEN.