

The Son of God Goes Forth to War: The Battle is Personal

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In Christ Jesus, who gave himself for us and to us, dear fellow redeemed,

Are you familiar with the concept of a “Judas goat”? The Judas goat was a commonplace figure in stockyards of yesteryear. It’s a goat that was trained to associate with sheep and cattle, until the animals became so “comfortable” with the goat that they would follow it anywhere. To what end? To a dead end! The Judas goat’s primary purpose was to lead sheep to slaughter, while its own life would be spared, again and again and again.

You don’t have to be a great Bible scholar to figure out how that stockyard goat got its name – from Judas, the man who had walked miles and miles beside Jesus, had heard his sermons, witnessed his miracles, prayed with Jesus, and even proclaimed his gospel. But this same man, Judas, became the betrayer.

It may be hard for us to fathom how someone who knew Jesus so well could turn on him so willingly, becoming a defector in the ranks of the Savior’s spiritual army. Let this be a reminder that as the Son of God goes forth to war, the enemy is closer to home than we might imagine. When there is a traitor at work, the battle is personal.

That was certainly the case with Judas. Right after the Last Supper, Jesus and eleven of his disciples had gone to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus went off to pray, urging his followers to do the same thing. When he returned, he found them all dozing. Jesus woke them, and **“While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, ⁴⁸ but Jesus asked him, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:47-48).**

Matthew tells us that Judas was unmoved by Jesus’ question. Instead, he did as planned. He singled Jesus out for the soldiers by kissing him, quite likely on both sides of his face, a greeting used among the best of friends. But, of course, the soldiers, Judas, and even Jesus knew that there was nothing friendly about this greeting. It was the betrayer’s way of handing Jesus over to his enemies.

How could this happen? What could turn Judas from friend to foe? Maybe you know how Judas was dealing with a traitor of his own. You might remember that he had served as the treasurer for the disciples, helping himself to the group’s money every now and again (See John 12:6). Judas had his own Judas goat – his own heart’s love for money. As Scripture warns, **“...the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” (1 Timothy 6:10).**

Satan knows this is true. He saw Judas’ greed as a way to gain control of Judas’ heart. John tells us that in the upper room, during the Passover meal, **“As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.” (John 13:27).** Described here is not a case of demonic possession, but the description of how Judas surrendered his heart to Satan’s will. This man’s love of money was an open door for the devil.

It is so sad. Judas experienced this huge struggle inside of himself, especially at the end. Satan had gained control of his sinful nature, driving him to do the unthinkable – to betray his friend and his Lord. I say the “unthinkable.” But is that really true? In other words, did Judas do something that no one else then or now could ever think to do?

I find it telling that when Jesus informed the disciples at the Last Supper that one of them was going to betray him, their first reaction was not to collectively look at Judas. No, instead, “...**they were very sad and began to say to [Jesus] one after the other, “Surely not I, Lord?”** (Matthew 26:22). Notice this wasn’t a statement reaffirming their loyalty. Each disciple was asking, “Am I the one?” What does that tell you? Each man knew his own sinful heart. Each man knew how susceptible he was to temptation. The battle against sin and Satan was a personal one, not just for Judas, but for the others as well.

Jesus warned all the disciples that the battle with Satan would be personal. He told them all that before night’s end, they would desert him. Jesus gave a special warning to Peter, who had boasted undying allegiance to Christ. It all happened, just as Jesus had said. The disciples fled, and, yes, Peter denied and disowned Jesus. For Judas, greed was the sin Satan used to overpower him. For Peter and the others, it was fear. Different sins, but the same result.

The battle against sin and Satan is no less personal for you and me. Each of us must confess with St. Paul, “**In my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.**” (Romans 7:22-23).

Paul speaks of the spiritual war going on inside us. God’s Spirit brought you and me to faith in Christ. As God’s children, we want to trust Jesus with all our heart. But our faith is under constant attack. Our sinful flesh is weak. Our spiritual enemy is strong. Satan knows just what buttons to push. He knows how to play on our weaknesses. He lures us into sin, convincing us that following God’s rules would rob us of every joy and pleasure. How often we fall for his lies, and just as soon as we do, Satan reverses field, now playing on our guilt. It happens to me. I’m guessing the same is true of you. You get flashbacks. You feel dirty and unworthy of Jesus. Maybe it isn’t just a flashback. Maybe it’s something that’s going on in your heart and life right now. Maybe you have X-rated thoughts, thoughts you are actively entertaining by visiting certain sites on the internet while you’re cooped up at home these days. Or maybe you’ve been having a few more drinks than you should, figuring if you’re not driving home from the bar or restaurant, it doesn’t really matter. Maybe you’re living in disappointment right now because you can’t work or because you have to work more. Maybe you are filled with worry because of what’s happening in the world around us. Perhaps depressing thoughts have been working against your faith, so that your trust in God’s promises is dwindling. Have you identified your Judas-goat, the sin that wants to lead you into Satan’s death-trap?

What do you plan to do about it? Honestly, what can you do about it? We must do what St. Paul did. As he experienced this war taking place inside of him, as he realized how helpless he was to rid himself of his Judas-goat, he cried out: “**What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?**” (Romans 7:24). We cannot save ourselves. We can’t get rid of our sinfulness and we cannot avoid the death to which it leads. We can’t, but there is One who can. Paul continues: “**Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!**” (Romans 7:25).

What we cannot do, God does for us in the person of his Son, the Warrior he sent to win the battle for our hearts. God’s answer to our Judas-goat was “...**the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**” (John 1:29).

In recent days our president has likened our battle with the coronavirus to a war. He has compared the doctors and nurses fighting this virus to soldiers on the frontlines. Many of us feel this way. Maybe you've seen the videos of entire communities coming out at a set hour of the evening to cheer on their medical workers. We recognize the sacrifices they are making as they put themselves in harm's way.

As much as we appreciate what all these workers are doing, can you imagine what it would mean to us and our world if one of these medical workers could put an end to the pandemic altogether? That person would be considered a great hero. His or her name would be known and celebrated everywhere.

Our world has a far greater hero – Jesus, who saved us from a fate far worse than COVID-19! He came to our rescue, wrapped not in a hazmat suit, but in human flesh and blood. Though he was the only holy person on the planet, he did not practice social distancing. He lived among us sinners, unafraid. In fact, rather than “catching” our sin, he gave us his holiness. And then, he made the greatest sacrifice of all, he took every bit of our sin and guilt upon himself. He suffered the wrath of God which was meant for us. And by his death in hell, he broke our curse once and for all. One man, the God-man, took care of everything in our place. He set us free from sin, from sin's guilt and from sin's punishment forever.

Jesus died for us and then he rose for us to protect us against every attack of Satan. The living Jesus gives us his powerful word to vaccinate us against Satan's lies. The Scriptures help us to see through these lies when the devil tempts us to sin. The words and promises of Jesus give us the power to tell Satan to get lost. And, when we fail to listen to the promises, when we fail to draw on their strength, and instead give in to sin's temptations, the living Jesus stays right with us. As the devil is beating us down with guilt, Jesus comes to us in his Word, renewing his promise again and again, that our sin is paid for, our guilt is removed from us, and we live as God's forgiven children, today, tomorrow and always.

Jesus never tires of showing us his love. Think about it. Not only does he speak these powerful promises to us in Scripture, he shares them with us through his own body and blood in his Holy Supper. In this sacred meal, the One who gave himself for us, gives himself to us for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Circumstances do not allow us to gather at the Lord's Table right now. I know that you miss this blessing. Your pastors do too. We are looking forward to the day we can commune together once again. In the meantime, we are so grateful to God for a precious Word that imparts forgiveness full and free. We are not able to commune, but our God makes sure that we do not go without the comfort and strength of his gospel, a gospel that we have the privilege of sharing with one another – all of us.

We might be practicing social distancing, but that doesn't have to stop us from reaching out to one another. Think of the people you visit with after a service here at Mount Olive. Call to mind Christian friends whose company you enjoy. Make time to reach out to them by phone, or text, or email. Encourage one another. Remind each other that while the battle against Satan is personal, we are not alone in the battle. We get to pray for one another and share with each other the Savior who loves us so, that he was willing to make our battle his own. Talk about personal – Jesus took up our cause, defeated our enemy and now, gives us his victory to enjoy, together, here and hereafter. Amen.