

Sifted Like Wheat

Job 1:6-12; Luke 22:1-34

The story of Holy Week in the Gospel of Luke portrays two features of the Lord Jesus each woven around the other. First of all, Jesus is absolutely in control, absolutely sovereign over a week in which Israel's history and Christ's own life story spin and swirl in ways that are darker and more complex than anyone other than Christ could imagine or grasp. And then second we see Jesus in the grip of emotions that are undeniably intense.

So on Palm Sunday, we saw Jesus on his way up the far side of Mt. Olive, sending two of his disciples into a nearby village where he knows they'll find an untamed donkey colt and he knows the owners of the colt will object to its being taken and he knows exactly what the disciples will need to say and he knows that the colt will accept him as a rider amid all the hoopla of a coronation parade. And everything he says materializes exactly as he told the disciples it would be.

And yet at the end of the parade, right up against the city gates, Jesus dissolves into weeping because he knows that no amount of warning or teaching will save the people of the city from the judgment he knows is coming their way. So Jesus weeps for what he knows.

Likewise tonight, Jesus has sent two disciples on ahead into a busy city where he knows they will meet a man coming back from a well, and he knows to what house the man is going and he knows that there's an upper room there and he knows just what the disciples will need to say. And he knows the master of the house will let them the room for the Passover feast that countless Christians will re-enact for countless generations in countless places.

Jesus knows, he is sovereign over it all. And yet what he knows doesn't prevent his heart from overflowing when they finally all reach the table. *"I have intensely desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."* Jesus told them, *"For I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."* The intensity Jesus feels is that of an athlete in an impossible race who sees the finish line drawing into reach even as his heart breaks with the effort it's going to take to get himself over the line and in for the victory for which so much is at stake and on which so many depend.

The intensity overflows into the time honored Passover ritual where Jesus opens the feast by thanking the Almighty for *"the fruit of the vine"*. *"Take this cup and share it among yourselves."* Jesus told them, *"For I say to you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine till the kingdom of God comes."* For everyone there these were familiar words, familiar gestures, but for Jesus the ritual of the old festival was electrified by the finish line that was now drawing so close. The kingdom of God for which Moses and Israel had set out so long ago was finally drawing near, one more feast, one more cup, and the kingdom would be in.

So now Jesus turned his thoughts to the home stretch, he took a loaf of unleavened bread and prophesied what it would become for countless people over countless generations in countless places. Luke tells us that “...*after giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.’*” So the bread without yeast which in the old ritual had spoken of life without sin would from that night forward speak to us of a sinless Savior whose company, whose presence within would sustain us through our long journey out of sin and into the wholeness and goodness and fullness that waits for us when our race is done.

“*Likewise,*” Luke tells us, “*he took the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’*” By which Jesus meant to say that, the old Angel of Death who had on just one night passed over Israelite homes whose thresholds were marked with blood, now what had been a sign on a single occasion would become a lifelong reality for anyone who will believe that God forgives the sins of anyone and everyone who trusts and follows Christ. To belong to Christ is to be so forgiven that death can’t hold us in the end.

These are wonderful things that bear remembering, that, once we give our lives over to him, the Jesus we read about and talk about is actually present inside us and among us, nourishing and helping us at times when we feel lost and hurt and frustrated by ...whatever. We need to remember when life starts to spin that Christ knows, that Jesus is sovereign even when we fail or are failed. We need to remember that, once we belong to Jesus, sin and failure, adversity and tragedy never get the last word. We are forgiven because Jesus died for us, we are alive because Jesus rose for us and nothing that happens to us can redefine what Christ has declared us to be.

And we need to remember that because intermixed with the good and the wonderful God promises will a come level of darkness and confusion and evil that will test and try everything we know about God. No sooner had Jesus promised his disciples forgiveness and life through the blood of the covenant than he announced, “...*behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man will go as has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!*”

Jesus knows. He is absolutely sovereign over everything that will happen to him and around him that night. And yet here at his table is man who will betray him and living in that man’s heart is Satan, the adversary of all the good and wonderful things that Jesus has painstakingly built in all these people’s lives over years of time and miles of countryside. And as soon as the bad guys get mention, as soon as deceit and treachery and malice hit the open air, the whole dinner begins to drift away. A room full of brothers and friends becomes a circle of suspects and prosecutors.

And in the swirl the disciples fall into rivalry and comparison, still thinking that Jesus will singlehandedly turn treachery into roses, and each one imagining that he is the greatest, that he’ll stand at Christ’s right hand when the kingdom comes in. So Jesus has to rope them all in, remind them all that God’s kingdom isn’t the Roman Empire, remind them all that the Sermon on the Mount was about the meek and the poor and the bereft and the lowly, remind them all that

he had only just got finished washing their feet. *“I am among you as one who serves,”* Jesus told them.

Still as rebukes go, this one is remarkably gentle and, in the end, Jesus addresses his men as brothers and friends: *“You are the ones who have stayed with me in my trials, and I confer on you what the Father conferred on me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* which they will and you and I, if we stick with Christ, will get to see it, but of course, this is all stuff from the beyond the finish line, these are all things that can only happen once the race is over.

And the truth be told, the race was nowhere near over, not for Jesus and even less for the rest of them at table. So Jesus moves on to talk about finishing the race. *“Simon, Simon,”* he says, *“Satan has demanded permission to sift you all like wheat! But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. So when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers!”* Few things to note. The Greek indicates that Satan was after them all, not just Simon.

But Jesus knew right then and we know from hindsight that Simon Peter was going to take the point. Simon will draw the sword on the posse in Gethsemane that night. Simon will sneak into the high priest’s courtyard and try to stick by Jesus without a plan and without a chance.

So Peter really meant what he promised Jesus about going to jail and even to death, he did try everything he knew to stick by Christ that night. The problem being that Peter’s plan didn’t account for what God had in mind and couldn’t cope with what Satan threw at him. So Peter looked at sure defeat in the high priest’s courtyard and backed away from Jesus to live another day. But what is scary is that Jesus knew. He was absolutely sovereign over Peter’s failure that night. It is both troubling and strangely comforting to consider how God engaged evil, engaged Satan that night, in order to vanquish Satan and evil both, for our sake and for Peter’s both.

Troubling, because it reveals a complexity in the struggle between good and evil, God and Satan, that few of us want to contemplate. And comforting, because Jesus was sovereign over evil that night that in a way protected Peter even though Peter failed in a way that could have destroyed him, had not Christ been so careful to pray for him. I’ll never untangle it all. But let me close with what I know.

The evil that took down Judas that night and frustrated Simon and scattered Jesus’ band of brothers away into the night was Satan. He appears to have been a fallen angel of immense stature and power who rallied some number of angelic creatures in an insurrection against God and humanity and everything right and good and worth living for. It appears that his success as the Serpent in the Garden, waylaying our ancestors won for him and the spirits allied with him some degree of God-given latitude in human affairs which allowed him to crash the Last Supper and tempt the disciples of Jesus in a way that God ultimately triumphed over in every case but Judas.

Satan is personal, powerful, resilient, and adaptable, more than a match for any fallen man or woman who would take him on apart from the grace and power of God. But also at table that night was the Son of God in human flesh, our Lord Jesus, who also is personal, absolute sovereign over all, resilient, adaptable and devoted to every soul who really trusts and follows him. The New Testament teaches that he is at the right hand of the Father in heaven praying for us the way he prayed Peter through that terrible night and through the shame and sorrow that followed it.

The why's and wherefores of God engaging with evil for good are more than I can untangle except to say that Jesus loved and sustained and helped Peter before, during and after his sifting that night...and it comforts me because I believe that he stills does that for all of us, any of us who love and trust him today. It doesn't mean that we'll never fail...or never suffering. It does mean that we will never fail and never suffer unloved and unhelped and alone. Even when we can't see him and feel him, even when we don't think we deserve him, Jesus is there for us. And that promise is good for any shadow.