

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/AUGUST 30, 2020

Call to Worship/Psalm 97 (NRSV)

The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!

Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;

righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

Fire goes before him, and consumes his adversaries on every side.

His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.

The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.

The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory.

All worshipers of images are put to shame,

those who make their boast in worthless idols;

all gods bow down before him.

Zion hears and is glad, and the towns of Judah rejoice,

because of your judgments, O God.

For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;

you are exalted far above all gods.

The LORD loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful;

he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.

Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

Opening Prayer

O mysterious God, creator of all things. You are our beginning and our end. You know our thoughts before we ever think them. You pay attention to the changes of each season, to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. You number the grains of sand on a beach and count the hairs on our heads. We give you thanks for every good gift—most especially for the gift of your Son, Jesus—the very personification of your love. We come to worship this morning to acknowledge our need of you. We come because we love you as much as we are able. We come because we choose to trust you to lead us on our life journey. In this time of worship, challenge and change us, heal and encourage us, teach and nurture us. Help us to grow into the persons you have created and called us to be. Through the power and prompting of your Holy Spirit, open our lips, our hearts, our lives as we worship you in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Scripture Lesson/Acts 1:15-26 (NRSV)

¹⁵In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶“Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— ¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. ¹⁹This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰“For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it’; and ‘Let another take his position of overseer.’ ²¹So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” ²³So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴Then they prayed and

said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." ²⁶And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Message/Matthias

In his "rockumentary" movie *It Might Get Loud*, director David Guggenheim tells the stories of three famous rock guitarists whose professional lives span fifty years — Jimmy Page of *Led Zeppelin*, The Edge from *U2*, and Jack White of *The White Stripes*. In an interview Guggenheim notes how even if you're not a fan of rock music, "you'll love the movie because many of the things said in the movie are universal."

My favorite scene occurs in Mount Temple Comprehensive high school in Dublin, where Edge was a student. The school is closed and empty, so Edge's voice echoes in the hallways. He walks up to a bulletin board and recalls how in 1976 a fourteen-year-old Larry Mullen posted a sign asking if anyone wanted to start a band. Six people responded. One quit after the first practice, a second left in a few weeks, and a third was edged out after a year. That left Mullen on drums, Adam Clayton on bass, David Evans (Edge) on guitar, and Paul Hewson (Bono) on vocals. At first the group was called *Feedback*, then *The Hype*, and finally *U2*. "We were really, really bad," said Edge. Of course, that was 150 million records ago. As Edge looked at the bulletin board, he paused, pondered, and then said: "I could have been a banker." Such was the mystery of his personal destiny, which mystery is, as Guggenheim noted, a universal experience for all of us. How can anyone fully explain how they arrived at where they are today?

This is a question I come back to on a regular basis. As I think about my call to ministry, the seeds of which were sown way back in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School and the worship and activities that I participated in my home church. On July 1st, I began my 23rd year of full-time ministry in The United Methodist Church. When I graduated high school in 1985, the idea of serving as a

pastor was an ephemeral pipedream. I liken my call to ministry as that of the Old Testament prophet Jonah. God called Jonah to preach a message of repentance to the Ninevites. Nineveh was the capital of the great Assyrian empire—the epicenter of power and control over all of the smaller nations around the near east at that time, including Israel. Jonah rebelled from his call and fled on a boat to the city of Tarshish, believed to be a coastal city in what is now Spain. For an ancient flat-earthier, to travel to Spain was basically going to the end of the earth. Jonah attempted to flee as far as he could. And yet, God found him and got his attention, redirecting Jonah via the belly of a fish, to fulfill his divine destiny.

While my story is not nearly as dramatic, I wanted to be, and then became, a flamethrower rock and roll DJ, with all the accompanying notoriety. You could say that radio was my *Tarshish*. And yet, at every misstep along the way through my twenties, I learned, and grew, and matured. Looking back, I can see God's hand helping me to develop into a person who would one day be ready to serve God's church. Had you asked me at twenty years old that I would one day be giving this sermon here this morning, I would have laughed in your face. I wasn't even United Methodist and the only reason I knew that Giles County existed was that I had a classmate and friend who was with me on the radio station at Radford University whose family owned the funeral home in Narrows. It's hard to explain. While I can tell you something about all the places I've lived and jobs I've done and people I've met along the way, the entirety of my story remains shrouded in mystery. It is what it is because of who God is and what God desires.

The reading from Acts this morning introduces two men, one of whom was part of the inner circle of Jesus's twelve apostles and the other a part of the unnamed group of men and women who traveled with Jesus. For two thousand years the name Judas Iscariot has epitomized infamy, treachery, and tragedy. As for Matthias, despite his importance as the "thirteenth apostle" who replaced Judas, history has consigned him to anonymity and obscurity. Since this is the only passage about Matthias in Scripture, we know nothing else about him except for some disparate traditions in early Christian literature. As I think about the lives of these two followers of Jesus, I find it difficult to understand how or why

each one ended up where he did. Such is the mystery of human decisions and divine destiny, both theirs and ours.

With his infamous kiss of betrayal, Judas "served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus" (Acts 1:16). But why? How could he have committed such a deplorable act? Three Scriptures locate the explanation outside of and beyond Judas's own choices. John's gospel says that Judas was "doomed to destruction" (John 17:12), as if some ominous fate overtook him. John and Luke also say that Judas's betrayal "fulfilled Scripture" (John 17:12, Acts 1:16). Luke also writes that "Satan entered Judas" to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3). However, I don't personally find any of these explanations very satisfying or illuminating or helpful.

Perhaps we shouldn't depict Judas as a mere pawn in a larger story. He did what he did for his own complex motives that are hard to fully discern based on the scarcity of information we have about him. Perhaps his prime motivation was greed. He did receive his infamous "thirty pieces of silver." Additionally, in the story of Mary using the costly perfume to anoint Jesus, we learn that Judas was the treasurer for the group. He was the keeper of the community purse that Jesus and the disciples used to help persons in need. A parenthetical statement in John 12:6 shares that "he was a thief" who often used the money on himself. He may have felt that he was in too deep and that he needed to get rid of Jesus to cover up his habitual embezzling. Perhaps it was rampant narcissism, thinking that he was better qualified than Peter, or James, or John or any of the others to take on a key position in this new kingdom about which Jesus kept talking. Judas may have been unable to rationalize all of Jesus' talk about suffering and death with the future Judas had in mind and that he had to do something to get things back on track and move events towards a more desirable, reasonable direction. Judas' motives can't really be locked down by any simple answer or theory. It's interesting that later, some folks gave Judas's reputation a distinct makeover. The recently discovered *Gospel of Judas*, a document that most likely dates to the third or fourth century AD, portrays Judas as a hero who betrays Jesus at Jesus' own request, and not as the quintessential villain.

As for his own convoluted motives and their tragic outcome, we can make three observations. First, Judas' betrayal of Jesus seems somewhat in line with what all the other disciples did. Peter denied that he would ever deny the Lord—but did so three times. The other disciples made the same promise, but when Jesus was arrested, all them deserted him and fled (Matthew 26:56). We should never deny our capacity for denial or our proclivity to run at the first sign of trouble. Second, after their betrayal and denial, Judas and Peter responded in similar ways. After aiding and abetting in the condemnation of Jesus, Judas was “filled with remorse” and returned the blood money. Peter broke down and wept. Both were deeply ashamed that they would turn on the One whom they loved. Finally, in playing the most undesirable role in all of human history, in some sense Judas triggered the events that lead to the greatest good for all humanity, the death and resurrection of Jesus. At any rate, St. Augustine is hardly the only believer to hope that “even from my sins God has drawn good.”

The selection of Matthias to replace Judas is likewise murky. Peter invokes Psalm 109:8 to validate the roll of the dice with the imprimatur of prophetic fulfillment: “May another take his place of leadership.” At a more mundane level, the eleven remaining apostles simply nominated two candidates: “they proposed two men” (Acts 1:23). When they prayed, they confessed that God had already chosen the right person, and that their task was to decipher the divine predetermination. Finally, the apostles resorted to lots to ascertain the divine intent — a roll of the dice identified Matthias instead of the alternate “Joseph called Barsabbas.”

This story in Acts chapter one is all that remains of the minutes from the first church meeting in history and is the only reference to Matthias in the New Testament. His life and missionary work are left to conjecture and competing traditions. Some have posited that Matthias was actually Zacchaeus, who left his tax collection business in Jericho after being called to come down from the sycamore tree, and then followed Jesus as part of the larger band of unnamed persons who accompanied him along the way. In the fourteenth century, Nicephorus said that Matthias preached and then died in the Caucasus region of what is now modern-day Georgia. The fifth century *Synopsis of Dorotheus* says

that Matthias proclaimed the gospel to the "barbarians and cannibals" who lived along the coast of the Black Sea. A third legend says that Matthias was stoned and then beheaded in Jerusalem. Another tradition finds that his bones had been taken all the way to a church in Trier, Germany. The mystery of Matthias's personal destiny thus includes great historical obscurity.

Contemplating this dance of human decision and divine destiny, I thought of John Milton (1608–1674), perhaps the greatest poet of the English language. Struck blind at the age forty-four, in his sonnet *When I Consider How My Light Is Spent*, Milton ponders why God would gift him with remarkable talents, only to take them back. He struggled with his feelings that the ways of God seemed harsh and arbitrary: "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?" Plunged into a world of darkness, Milton wondered:

*When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or His own gifts. Who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.*

Patience, humility, availability, and even resignation to the inscrutabilities of divine designs all serve us well. In the words of Milton's near contemporary George Herbert (1593–1633), it's best to "leave thy cold dispute/about what is fit or not" (*The Collar*). Whoever we are and wherever we are — a rock star like The Edge, a flamethrower rock and roll DJ like Scott Morris (my on-air name), an

infamous scapegoat like Judas, an obscure apostle like Matthias, or a struggling, blind poet like Milton — we all can serve God best right where we are, even when we "only stand and wait."

Pastoral Prayer

O Lord our God, we thank you for the disciples

who left their nets, their families, their livelihoods to follow you.

We thank you for the gift of your Spirit

whose power propelled their faithful witness to the ends of the earth.

We thank you for all followers of Jesus of every time and place

enabling your dream for our world to become visible for everyone to see.

O Lord, we thank you for the truth they have learned and have passed on to us.

As they cheer us on as part of the "great cloud of witnesses,"

give us the courage to run the race of faith with perseverance,

keeping our eyes upon Jesus,

that we, too, might be faithful witnesses to future generations.

We pray for the millions in our world who are hungry this today.

We pray for those who are exploited and marginalized

because of their class, their color, their faith, or their gender.

Because of our faith in the One who reached out to the most vulnerable,

give us the courage to stand beside them,

to use our hands and hearts to offer them comfort and care,

and our voices to speak up for justice and restoration on their behalf.

We call upon you for those who are persecuted, imprisoned, tortured

or threatened because of their witness to your justice and peace.

We remember those who live in regions torn by

tension and war, by disaster, famine, and poverty.

We pray for the millions of refugees around the world

striving to simply find safe places to raise their families.

Lord, into your hands we commend your beloved creation,

ever threatened by callous human greed and consumption.

We pray for all who are sick,

for those facing the end of life,

for those who are grieving and lonely,

for those who are anxious and afraid,

for all who have attempted to deaden their pain

through addictive behaviors.

Look upon each of these with your healing light

and remind them of your precious love for them,

that hope might arise in their hearts.

O Lord, we offer these petitions, and all the prayers of our hearts

in the name of the One who calls us to pray together

as one family and with one voice:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Benediction *(traditional Gaelic blessing)*

May the road rise to meet you,

may the wind be always at your back,

may the sun shine warm upon your face,

may the rains fall soft upon your fields,

and until we meet again,

may God hold you in the palm of God's hand. **Amen.**