

This Lent I'm doing something a bit different. I will not be preaching on our particular scripture readings week by week during Lent. Instead, I want to focus on the big scripture readings that come at the end of every Lent. I want to spend some extra time this year focusing on the accounts of Holy Week, the accounts of Jesus' Passion.

We read the Passion twice every Holy Week. On Palm Sunday every year we read together the Passion from Matthew, Mark, or Luke. And every Good Friday we hear the Passion according to John.

But those are long and rich readings. And really don't get to preach about all of the players, all of the themes that appear in those accounts. So this year, I want to spend the next 5 Sundays zeroing in on various aspects of the Passion accounts we hear every year. And this week I want to focus in on the disciples.

The two disciples we hear most about in the Passion accounts are Peter and Judas. I'll say more about both of them in a minute.

But I want to start with a few words about the disciples in general.

We sometimes have an incomplete picture of the disciples. The Sunday School pictures I remember as a child showed Jesus walking around with 12 disciples, and that's it.

The true picture in scripture is a little different.

Yes, there were 12 disciples. But they were a subset of a larger group of disciples.<sup>1</sup> The larger group may have numbered up to 120.<sup>2</sup> And at one point, Jesus sends 70 of them out on a mission.<sup>3</sup> So "the twelve" are a very important inner circle of disciples. But they are not the only disciples.

In fact, in the book of Acts when the 11 remaining apostles are trying to find a replacement for Judas, they want to pick someone from that larger group of disciples who had been with Jesus during his entire ministry, from the day of his baptism all the way through his resurrection and ascension. And they are able to find at least 2 candidates who fit that bill.<sup>4</sup>

Plus, it's not an all-male club. The twelve are all men. But Luke specifically says that there were a number of women in the larger group, three of whom he lists by name: Susanna, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene, along with, in his words, "many others."<sup>5</sup>

So when we think of the disciples in the Passion accounts, we should think of the twelve. But we should also keep in mind the larger group of disciples as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See Luke 6:13 for example

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:15

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:1ff

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:21-22

<sup>5</sup> Luke 8:1-3

But the disciples with the biggest role in the Passion narratives are undoubtedly Peter and Judas. I want to spend a little time on each of them in turn.

Peter. The New Testament portrays Peter as a leader amongst the disciples, both before and after Jesus' Resurrection. And yet the centerpiece of Peter's behavior during the Passion is his denial of Jesus. It appears in all 4 Gospels.

Jesus is on trial in the High Priest's house. And Peter is outside in the courtyard along with a number of bystanders. A servant girl thinks she recognizes him. She says, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth."<sup>6</sup> But Peter denies that he even knows him. Twice more it happens, with other people questioning Peter. Twice more, Peter denies knowing Jesus, let alone being one of his disciples, let alone being a leader amongst the disciples.

Two poignant things here.

First, just weeks before, Peter had made the great Confession of faith. When Jesus asked, who do you say that I am, Peter said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."<sup>7</sup> He gives the most complete statement of faith up to that point. He takes the lead amongst the other disciples in knowing and confessing who Jesus is.

But now, Peter denies any knowledge of who Jesus is. And Peter denies 3 times that he even knows Jesus.

But even more poignant is the fact that just the night before, only several hours before, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him. And that night, Peter denied that he would ever deny Jesus. Peter proclaimed that he was ready to go to his own death on behalf of Jesus. But the next day, when push comes to shove, Peter caves in. Out of fear, out of weakness, Peter denies Jesus, just as Jesus predicted he would.

But there's something important here. Peter could have gotten away with denying Jesus. And we would have never known. He could have kept silent about it, and he could have taken the secret to his grave.

But he didn't. He must have talked about it to other Christians. Because not only was the story known, it was known well enough to be told in all 4 Gospels. So Peter must have talked about it.

In fact, I believe Peter talked about it a lot. I suspect that he would often tell that story. I suspect that was something he worked into his sermons. I suspect that he could bring an audience to tears with the account of his denial. Why would he tell it? Because on the other side of the Passion, after the Resurrection, the Risen Christ offered him forgiveness. Yes, Peter would have had to swallow some of his pride. But I suspected he did so gladly in order to share with all who would listen the amazing good news of God's love and forgiveness.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 14:67

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 16:16

And that's what saddens me most about Judas Iscariot. I think Judas could have told a similar story about Jesus' love and forgiveness. But he despaired and killed himself before Jesus' Resurrection.

Don't get me wrong. Judas did a bad, bad thing. Betraying Jesus to the authorities for money was certainly bad. And it was somewhat worse than what Peter did. But publically betraying Jesus is not an order of magnitude worse than publically denying Jesus. Thus I firmly believe that if Judas were still alive on Easter Sunday, he would have experienced Jesus' forgiveness, just as Peter did.

In Dante's *Inferno*, Judas is portrayed as being in the lowest circle of Hell, being chewed for all eternity in the mouth of Satan himself. That's pretty extreme. But it is also a strong theme in Dante's *Inferno* that the sinners in Hell are there because they refused to acknowledge their sin and ask for God's mercy. In other words, God's grace and forgiveness were available to them, but they refused it. It's a tragic part of the story of Judas that he never sought that forgiveness, or that he never believed that forgiveness was possible for him.

There's also a perennial question out there about Judas's motivation in betraying Jesus. For the writer of the Gospel of John, the only Gospel to suggest a motive, it was easy: Judas must have done it for the money.<sup>8</sup>

But there have been other suggestions through the years. And many of them cluster around one of 2 interpretations of Judas's surname: Judas Iscariot. Iscariot may mean from the Judean town of Kerioth. If this is the case, Judas would have been the odd man out amongst the 12. Jesus and the other 11 disciples were from Galilee in the north—Judas would have been from Judea in the south. So maybe this led to feelings of alienation that later grew into betrayal.

Or there are a number of scholars who suggest that Iscariot means that Judas was one of the Sicarii. The Sicarii were a subgroup of the anti-Roman Zealot party. There was another disciple, Simon the Zealot, who was one of the twelve. The Sicarii took it a step further than most Zealots. They were a terrorist group who tried to assassinate Romans whenever they could pick them off.

If Judas was part of this group, he may have been hoping that Jesus would start a rebellion against Rome. And the thought is that it may have played out in one of two ways.

Maybe Judas was frustrated that Jesus wasn't acting quickly enough, and tried to force his hand, to goad him into starting the rebellion. Or maybe Judas was completely disillusioned with Jesus and decided to betray him out of spite, or simply for the money.

But there's a grave danger when it comes to Judas. It's all too easy for us to read the Passion accounts and find scapegoats. We can blame Judas. Or we can blame the Jewish priests. Or we can blame the Jewish people. Or we can blame Pontius Pilate. And in past history, people have done all of these things.

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<sup>8</sup> See John 12:6

But we have to remember that none of the twelve stood by Jesus. They ran.

Yes, Judas betrayed Jesus, literally.

But Peter betrayed Jesus by denying him.

And the rest of the disciples betrayed Jesus by fleeing for their lives.

Yes, in the Gospel of John, one disciple did stand at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother. The Gospel doesn't ever name him, it simply calls him the "disciple whom Jesus loved." He may have been John, the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve. Or he may have been a different anonymous disciple, and not one of the twelve.

In any case, of the twelve, one betrayed Jesus. The other eleven ran. One of the 11 came back but then denied Jesus three times. And another of the 11 *may* have been brave enough to show up the next day at the foot of the cross. That track record doesn't speak very well of these twelve disciples as a whole.

And to place all of the blame on one of them, to make one of them the scapegoat, as has so often happened with Judas, is to miss the fact that there was plenty of blame to go around.

In fact, there's an old Spanish folk tale that makes a powerful point. It focuses on the moment at the Last Supper when Jesus announces, "One of you will betray me." The disciples then ask, "Is it I Lord?" And that's where the folk tale picks up. This part is fiction, not scripture.

But as the story goes, the disciples start talking amongst themselves trying to figure out the identity of the betrayer. And eventually they decide they're going to count to three and shout out the name of the disciple whom they think is the betrayer. And when they do, the twelve disciples shout out twelve different names. In other words, each of them is capable of betraying Jesus. And in some way, each of them does.

And of course, for Jesus' followers today, the same thing holds. Each of us is capable of denying Jesus, or of betraying Jesus, or of running away from Jesus. And we all do these things in various ways in our lives. We also stand in need of Jesus' love and forgiveness. And the good news is, that love is there for us, just as it was 2,000 years ago.

However, I would be remiss if I didn't mention one other group of disciples. They acquitted themselves much better than the twelve did. These followers were part of that larger group that may have numbered up to 120. A number of them stuck by Jesus. They were some of Jesus' female disciples. While the bulk of the twelve ran away from the cross, it was a group of these women, including Mary Magdalene, who witnessed the crucifixion. And two days later when the bulk of the twelve was hiding out in fear, it was these female disciples who went to the tomb, and who became the first witnesses to the Resurrection.

In the Passion of Jesus, it is these female disciples who act most admirably. And they are certainly worthy of honor, and of emulation.

And later, the rest of the male disciples would also act in a way that was admirable. Though they messed up during Jesus' Passion, the remainder of the twelve eventually became bold witnesses to his Resurrection. And eventually, they would risk their lives, and give their lives, to proclaim the good news of God's forgiveness and love. And they too, in this later phase, are worthy of honor and emulation.

May we remember them with thanksgiving.  
And may we profit by their example.