

When sheep are taken to be slaughtered, they will often balk at doing unfamiliar things like getting off the truck or getting into the chute. But sheep will follow a goat or another sheep. So often a goat or sheep who lives on the site and is familiar with the surroundings is used to lead the flock off the truck. The sheep will follow this one wherever it goes, in this case right to the slaughter. It is known as a Judas goat or Judas sheep, named for the disciple of Jesus who betrayed him. This morning's passage from John 13 sheds some light on this enigmatic biblical character.

²¹After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. ²³One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; ²⁴Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." ²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need

for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

(John 13:20-30)

Let's set the scene. It was the evening before Good Friday, the day Jesus would die on the cross. He and his disciples have gathered for an evening meal. They were reclining around a low table as was the custom in that day. Jesus had already performed the lowly task of washing their feet. He then explained how they, too, should humbly serve one another. And then he abruptly changes the subject and predicts his betrayal. This is the third reference to his betrayal in this chapter.

Notice that Jesus is deeply troubled, a reminder that he was a real flesh-and-blood human being with feelings just like ours. He announces that one of them will betray him. This exact moment is captured in Leonardo DaVinci's painting of The Last Supper. (A slide of the painting was shown at this point.) You can see the disciples breaking into confused conversations about Jesus' announcement. Who could Jesus possibly mean? Which one of them would betray him? To our right, there are two groups of three disciples discussing the matter. To our far left we find another group of three. On the immediate left of Jesus, we find the disciple whom Jesus loved talking with another disciple. And by himself, with his right hand clutching a bag of money and his left hand reaching for the

bread, we find Judas. You may not be able to see it, but all the other disciples have faint halos above their heads. Not Judas, of course.

Next, Simon Peter motions to the “disciple whom Jesus loved” to ask Jesus what he meant. Who is this “disciple whom Jesus loved,” and why did Jesus love him, apparently more or at least differently than he loved the other disciples? He will be mentioned seven times by the end of John’s gospel. There are several suggestions as to his identity. Some suggest that this disciple is Lazarus, whom we are told specifically that Jesus loved back in chapter 11. Others have suggested the rich young ruler who appears in the other gospels, who Jesus also loved. But most scholars believe that this disciple is John, the writer himself. He was a first cousin of Jesus and the youngest of the disciples, living over 50 years after Jesus’ ministry on earth.

This would mean that Jesus had watched him grow up. John would have been a teenager or very young adult when he followed Jesus as one of the twelve. That may explain why he was so special to Jesus. Still, it is odd that the author of the book would refer to himself in this way, as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” So some believe that it was not John himself who wrote this description, but that John’s followers edited his gospel a little to reflect his special relationship with Jesus and give his gospel even greater credibility.

At any rate, Peter signals him to ask Jesus about the coming betrayal. He does, and Jesus quietly responds that the one to whom he hands a piece of bread dipped in the dish is the one. He then hands the bread to Judas, and Judas leaves to commit his evil act of betrayal.

Now there has been a great deal of speculation about Judas, his motivation, and even about his salvation or lack thereof. We actually don't know much about him, but here are a few things we do know. The name Judas was a common one, and "Iscaiot" may simply mean that he's the Judas from Charioth. Jesus apparently saw some potential in him, as he selected him to be one of his twelve closest followers. Judas would have heard Jesus' teaching, seen his miracles firsthand, and watched as he took on the religious establishment. He would have also heard Jesus' private teaching to the twelve.

On the other hand, he was the one who criticized Jesus' friend Mary when she anointed Jesus' head with expensive ointment, saying that the money could have been better used to help the poor. That sounds pretty noble, but John tells us that Judas only said this because he was the group treasurer and had his hand in the till! So, what drove him to sell out Jesus as he did?

The Bible isn't clear. In Matthew we're told that he sought out the chief priests to ask how much they would pay him to betray Jesus. They

settled on an amount of thirty pieces of silver. The motivation of greed seems consistent with his stealing from the group's common purse. So greed seems to be at least part of his motivation.

But in John 13, we're told that Satan entered Judas after he had taken the bread from Jesus. This has led some to speculate that Judas was really just a pawn in some kind of cosmic contest between God and Satan- "The devil made him do it!" That he is a kind of tragic figure with no responsibility for his actions. Others speculate that Judas may have been affiliated with the Zealots, a group that favored the violent overthrow of the Romans. He became disillusioned with Jesus when it became clear that he had no intention of leading a revolt against the oppressors. In that case Judas would have betrayed Jesus because of his great disappointment in the direction Jesus was taking. And a few people even think that Judas was a hero in the story, that he was acting on Jesus' secret instructions to arrange his arrest, so he would be crucified to atone for the sins of the world.

The problem in understanding Judas' motivation and responsibility is partly due to the very limited amount of information the New Testament provides to us about him. But the truth is that we have trouble understanding the source and responsibility for evil anywhere in our world, not just in Judas. We don't have time to delve into all of those issues

today, but let's make a couple observations that may guide us in understanding Judas.

First, although the scripture asserts clearly and often that God is sovereign and has plans for his creation, nowhere does the Bible teach that God's will negates human choice. The fact that the Old Testament prophets foresaw that a close friend would betray the Messiah for 30 pieces of silver does not take away Judas' own role in making that happen.

Second, people often move toward large acts of evil in small, almost imperceptible ways over time. In the case of Judas, we know that he was in the habit of stealing from the other disciples, which may have allowed the spiritual cancer of greed to take root in his heart. When coupled with his other issues with Jesus, it may have been enough to push him toward the awful act of betraying an innocent man.

Third, the role of Satan in human acts of evil is a mysterious one. But, from beginning to end, the Bible lays some of the blame for evil in our world at the feet of heavenly beings who oppose God's good work. And yet, evil usually works in cooperation with the human will rather than overriding it. In the case of Judas, he had already arranged for the betrayal of Jesus as he sat at the table. Satan simply took up residence in his heart in the place Judas had already opened up for evil purposes.

To some of you this may seem like needless, philosophical, theological speculation, with no relationship to our real-world situations. But it isn't! We often wrestle with these same issues today. For example, after a mass shooting or terrorist attack, reporters and other commentators invariably try to understand the reason for the evil done by the shooters or terrorists. Why did they do this? Was it something in the way they were raised? Was there a failing in their community or in society in general? Did mental illness play a role? We want to find the logical causes of human evil. But logic will only get us so far in explaining evil. We must reckon with the predisposition toward evil in each human heart.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's theological liberalism dominated Protestant thinking. It led to the social gospel movement, with its very optimistic idea that Christians working together could make things so good in our world that we could bring about the Kingdom of God, and the return and rule of Jesus. That sunny movement came to a crashing halt because of one event- World War One. The evil unleashed by that conflict undercut any sense of unbridled optimism among Christians of that time. The optimistic theology of that era had failed to take evil seriously enough.

Any realistic view of our world must take the reality of evil seriously. And our view of the world impacts all kinds of our decisions, including the way we govern ourselves. That's why there are checks and balances built

into our American form of government- to minimize the impact of selfishness and evil on our nation. And that's why it's important that such checks and balances always be there.

Further, evil is not only out there someplace in the world; it's in the church as well. Judas' story reminds us that evil can be present close to the very center of Christian religion. For example, most German Christians sided with Nazism. American Christians in the South opposed the abolition of slavery and many Christians fought against the civil rights movement. And we've seen evil revealed recently in the sexual abuse perpetrated by priests and other religious leaders.

That's why I'm grateful for our Presbyterian form of government, because it places checks and balances on pastors, churches, and presbyteries. We need that, because every one of us is capable of committing and then rationalizing evil acts that are truly horrifying! In the remaining chapters of John's Gospel, Jesus will instruct his followers about strategies for keeping evil in check so we can do the wonderful good that God has in mind for us. I hope you'll stay tuned!

In the meantime, don't forget the end of the story that is coming. God's work in the world will not ultimately be derailed by human evil, even an evil as horrible as putting an innocent man to death by the torture of

crucifixion. God's love will prevail against evil, as evidenced by the empty tomb. That gives us hope!