

“And It Was Night”

Holy Wednesday

April 12, 2006

At the exact moment of Christ’s betrayal by Judas Iscariot, John gives a simple description of the atmosphere surrounding the event. John says, “And it was night.” Need he say more. “And it was night.” At the moment of Judas’ greatest sin, at the moment of any sin, that is the state of our souls...And it was night. And when we commit sin that is exactly what it is like. It is dark, we feel a chill, we cannot see where we are putting one foot in front of the other. The shadows are scary and seemingly fathomless. We don’t know exactly what’s in there in the dark, but we somehow know it’s not good. And we are all alone. And such is the nature of sin.

Holy Wednesday signals that the great journey in Christian faith from Maundy Thursday to Easter is about to begin. It is the night before the Last Supper. The night before Christ is arrested and the great downward spiral towards Good Friday begins. The great drama has not begun, but it is looming on the horizon. The disciples are still basking in the glow of Palm Sunday, the day that Christ rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. At this point during that fateful week, I’m sure the disciples were hopeful. There was likely a sense of euphoria. They were having a good time with Jesus, completely and utterly ignorant of what would befall them in just twenty-four hours. Or maybe there was a sense of impending doom. Maybe some knew, most especially Peter, that something was not quite right. Possibly it showed in Jesus’ countenance. The Scripture from Isaiah describes what many think is a prophecy about the manner of Christ’s death. And in verse 7 it says that God’s servant has “set [His] face like a flint.” I believe **that** is what Christ’s countenance was like. He now had a determined look on His face. He had set His face like a flint.

When I worked as a research professor at the University of Tennessee, I would spend two to three months out of the year at the University of Michigan doing research. Often I would travel up there during the winter and spend up to five weeks at a time there without my family, all on my own. I would live in a tiny apartment near the campus and spend 16-18 hours a day, seven days a week, in the laboratory there collecting data on lunar rocks and meteorites. Although I needed this data to do the research, and the writing of papers and interpretation of the data was my bread and butter, I sometimes loathed collecting the data. I hated being away from my wife and small children. I hated not being with my church family. I hated working 16-18 hours a day, every day, with no break. I hated Michigan in the winter. It was always gray...gray sky, gray snow, gray people...dreary. And beginning about three or four days before I was to leave to be gone for one of my five-week stints my countenance would change. Or so my wife, Beth, says. In fact, I remember one time her trying to get my attention to discuss something about the kids, or about the house, or about our relationship, and, of course, I was not listening. And she said to me, "You're already gone, aren't you?" I'll never forget that. And she was right, of course, I was already gone. I was thinking about the samples I was going to take with me, about the types of data I would collect, about what I would take with me. I was already feeling that deep empty pit in my stomach at my leaving my wife and kids. I was already gone. In some small way, I had set my face like a flint toward Ann Arbor, Michigan. I can imagine that Christ might have also been so preoccupied.

He was thinking about what He would say and do with His disciples His last few hours on this Earth. How could He prepare them for the coming storm? What would make an impact on them? Was He physically up to the task set before Him? Would He come right up to the moment of His betrayal and then lose heart? Could His body withstand the agony? Could His soul withstand the overwhelming betrayal of His friends? Could His soul withstand the weight of every sin ever committed? Could His soul withstand the separation from His Father, His very self, at the exact moment of His sacrifice? Surely His countenance betrayed His concern, His distress,

His struggle. He probably felt that deep empty pit in His stomach at having to be separated from His dear friends. For He had set his face like a flint.

So that even in all of this, He is just like us. He has experienced the seemingly impenetrable darkness. And it was night. He has experienced even this. And yet, He was not overcome by it, but overcame it. And because He has experienced every disappointment, every worry, every betrayal, every pain that we have, He can walk with us through our dark nights.

The story is told of a man who fell into a deep hole; a hole so deep that he could not get out of it. He screamed and screamed for help. A priest passes by. "Hey, Father, he says, throw me down a rope." But, instead, the priest throws down the Prayer Book. An engineer passes by and so the man asks again for him to throw down a rope so he can climb out. But, the engineer just throws down a manual on excavation and how to construct a perfect hole. Finally, a friend walks by. The man in the hole says, "Friend, lower down that rope and I'll climb out." But, before he knows it, the friend has jumped into the hole with him. The man, angry, turns to his friend and says, "What, are you mad, now we're both stuck in this hole." The friend says, "Yeh, but I've been in this hole before, and I know the way out." Brothers and sisters, Jesus has been in this hole before, and He knows the way out! He has been in the hole of your addiction, your loss, your pain, your loneliness, your betrayal, and He knows the way out! Amen! He has experienced every dark night that you can ever imagine. And then, if that were not enough, He drew near to us on the cross, and promised to be with us in all of our darkness. And then, if that were not enough, He defeated death on the cross, and then carried all of those experiences with Him back into heaven and made them a part of God's very experiences. There is no other religion, no other experience, no other god who can say this. The God we worship has experienced all that we have experienced. And because of that, He cares deeply, understands completely, and deals with us compassionately.

And it was night. But, we are not alone in our darkness. And it was night. But, we are not alone in our pain. And it was night. But, we are not alone in our sorrow. And it was night. But we are not alone in our addiction. And it was night. But, we are not alone in our sins. For God Himself has drawn near to our soul...and redeemed it.

And it was night.

Amen.

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