

Two Gory Stories

St. Mark Lutheran
Two services

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Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in the ministry." (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. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For it is written in the Book of Psalms, 'May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it'; and 'Let another take his office.'"

So one of the men who has accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning with the baptism of John until the day when he was taken from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to the resurrection. And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Acts 1:12-26

In today's sermon text, the disciples were "on their own" for the first time. Do you realize what had just happened? Jesus had just ascended into heaven. What were they going to do now? What would you have done? Our text tells us that they returned home to Jerusalem and went to the upper room where they were staying. Verse fourteen tells us, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." It seems as though there were about 120 persons in all.

What an emotional rollercoaster ride the disciples had been on! First, they had the betrayal by Judas, one of their inner group of twelve. Then came the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. That was hard to top, but the Lord did it with his resurrection from the dead. Then the disciples were riding high and expecting great things and Jesus ascended into heaven. I thought of the disciples last Monday as I attended the Memorial Service for our veterans at the Chester Twp. Cemetery. One of the speakers used this quote in his comments: "They were called to participate in something much greater than themselves."

This was said of our war veterans, but it certainly applies to Jesus' disciples also: "They were called to participate in something much greater than themselves." They were caught up in the war of all wars, the struggle between good and evil, the struggle between God and those who have rebelled against him. They were major participants in a conflict which would determine which people would be going to heaven and enjoying an eternity with God and which people would be going to hell. It wasn't and it isn't a nice situation.

This colossal story centers around two gory stories. The first is told in graphic form in our Acts 1 text for today. Judas, one of the original twelve, betrayed Jesus, which led to the suffering and death of the Son of God. He guided the soldiers arresting Jesus. He was paid to do this. The Holy Spirit revealed this was to happen ahead of the time when he spoke through the prophets on what was to come. In our reading from Acts today, you will notice there are parentheses around verses 18 and 19. These words are not part of Peter's speech. They are an explanation from Luke and give us gory details concerning the death of Judas. The Scriptures indicate that in the end he hanged himself from a tree. Apparently he hung there for some time before his body finally fell, splitting open, with his insides spilling out as a result.

Feeling remorse over his sin, Judas had tried to return the money he was paid but the priests did not want to take it back because they considered it blood money. The chief priests finally picked up the thirty pieces of silver and used them to buy a potter's field as a burial place for strangers. It is known as the "Field of Blood" to this day. (Matthew 27:3-10) Isn't it astounding that the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah predicted that all of this would happen?

Directed by the Holy Spirit and writings in the Book of Psalms, the disciples and many followers of Jesus met to decide on a replacement for Judas. They wanted it to be someone who had been with them from the time of Jesus' baptism and also a witness to his resurrection. They prayed for God's guidance, cast lots, and Matthias was chosen.

The second story, the gory but necessary crucifixion of Jesus Christ, does not explicitly appear in today's text. But it is written in many pages elsewhere in the Holy Scriptures how he was arrested, falsely accused, rejected, mocked and spit upon, and died in agony on the cross to pay for our sins. But note this fact of great importance: both Jesus and Judas died horrible deaths in fulfillment of Scripture.

The truth is that both gory deaths have some things in common, but the implications of the details are entirely different. The death of Judas is horrible to contemplate, but the death of Jesus brings consolation and salvation to the believer. Both Jesus and Judas died on a tree. The tree on which Judas died is nothing more than a tree of death, and a symbol of hopelessness and despair. But the tree on which Jesus died has actually become a tree of life, which brings great hope for the future to all who believe.

Both the lives of Jesus and Judas were finished in a gory and bloody way. The gory death of Judas makes us want to turn away from the results in revulsion and sadness. The blood of Jesus on the other hand "cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7). Hebrews 9:22 confirms that with its statement that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Both Jesus and Judas were forsaken and deserted in death. We believe Psalm 69:5 refers to Judas when it states, "May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it." In the end, Judas died all alone, and like all those who die without true repentance and faith, he faces an eternity of separation from God. Jesus was also abandoned and forsaken in his death. Remember his words of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." He was forsaken, for a time, as our substitute and sin bearer. But his death in the end brought us salvation, and we have his great words of comfort to help sustain us: "I will never leave you or forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

Why does God, working through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, include such gory and graphic details about Jesus' death and Judas' death and others? We don't know the mind of God on some things, but perhaps it is meant to snap people out of the fairy-tale view of life that some people have. It is a necessary reminder that we are in a world of sin and death and that humankind has always faced horrible, bloodthirsty enemies. We have Satan, the instigator behind this rebellion against God; we have sin, brought into this world because our first parents trusted in the words of the devil rather than the Word of God; we have death, a penalty we brought on ourselves because of our disobedience; and we have hell, a penalty we will receive if we do not trust in what Jesus did to pay for our sins.

The disciples of Jesus' day faced a daunting task following his ascension into heaven. So what did they do? They had fellowship, they spent time in prayer, they replaced Judas with Matthias, and they, by the grace and strength of God, moved forward. They did what Jesus told them to do. The result was that the world was significantly transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, despite the fierceness of the opposition.

The church of Jesus Christ faces the same enemies today. The horrific enemies of humankind: Satan, sin, death, and hell are still around, aren't they? But just as the disciples endured through fellowship and communion, prayer, and devotion to God's Word, we can do the same and move forward and accomplish much at this time in history.

There is little doubt that there will be challenges and possibly even worse. But let us keep our focus on the future Christ has won for us and the promises he has made. We have been called to be the people of God at this time in history and to never, ever, give up. It is said that "After the clouds, comes the sun." It is also said, "After defeat, comes victory." 1 John 1:7 tells us, "Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" And even as our journey through this world ends in death, we have the words of Christ's Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 15 to comfort us: "Death is swallowed up in victory...thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Amen.