

Arrest and Denial

John 18:1-18

October 9, 2022

Read John 18:1-18

This is the Word of the LORD.

As we begin this new section of John, I think it is probably important for you to know that this is going to be a tough couple of weeks for humanity. Humanity does not show well here; in fact, we see the depth, scope, and breadth of the depravity of humankind in its ugly fullness. That said, it also is important to know that as poorly and depraved as humanity is revealed to be, how much more overwhelming and powerful is the mysterious love of God revealed in Jesus. Despite our hopelessness – in fact, because of our hopelessness – there is abundant reason for hope because Jesus is exactly who he said he was.

Setting the Context

At the risk of having you roll your eyes because I keep reviewing the context; it is essential we see these events in the larger picture, even as we look at the particulars.

For the last two months we have been looking at the last night Jesus had with his disciples. A lot happened. We saw Jesus wash the disciples' feet. While they were celebrating the Passover meal, Judas left to betray Jesus. As they were about to make their way to the garden that was familiar to the disciples, Jesus continued to teach. He talked about the vine and the branches, and how it was essential that believers abide in him. Jesus commanded the disciples to love one another as He loved them. He made clear to them, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you."

In fact, throughout this whole final discourse to the disciples, Jesus had been clear about the conflict between the world and the Kingdom of God. A number of times, he had declared that the world hated him and the Father. He said that the world did not know him or the Father. In short, the world rejected both Jesus and the Father. Jesus told the disciples about his crucifixion, how they would scatter upon his arrest, and then – remarkably – he told them, "I have conquered the world!"

Last week, we read about Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. Jesus prayed for himself, for the disciples, and for all those who would believe through the testimony of the disciples. Now, we move into Jesus' passion: his obedience unto death, even death on a cross.

Judas

Chapter 18 begins with Jesus taking the walk to the garden. When we talk about the overwhelming and powerful love of God, we need look no farther than that one sentence. Jesus walked **to** the garden. He knew Judas had left to betray him. He knew that he was walking toward his arrest and all that would entail. He could have chosen any different path to escape, leaving Judas empty-handed, embarrassed, shamed, scorned, and outcast. Instead, Jesus walked toward the garden.

Indeed, Judas did know of the place. He brought with him a detachment of soldiers (Romans) together with the police from the chief priests and the Pharisees (Temple authorities). Judas functioned as the catalyst for putting together these two groups from the world: the Romans and the temple authorities.

The Romans were there because they were going to stop any kind of insurrection. Jerusalem was an anxious enough place for the Romans during Passover; the potential for a revolt was high. The temple police were there – this time with the intent to do what they had failed to do previously.

This time? Well, you might remember that we had read about this law agency previously: specifically, in John 7. There, during the Festival of Booths, the chief priests and the Pharisees sent the temple police to arrest Jesus. Jesus was speaking publicly and, as John noted, “no one laid hands on him.” Beginning in verse 45, John wrote,

Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him?” The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law — they are accursed.”

With that as the background, it is not difficult to imagine that the temple police were not about to be shamed again. The assembled forces vastly outnumbered any resistance that would reasonably be anticipated.

Judas was the catalyst. His betrayal was just the thing the temple authorities needed. John was making clear just how hardened was Judas’ heart and resolve against Jesus. He brought the soldiers and police. When Jesus asked whom they were seeking, John noted that ***Judas stood with them*** and against Jesus.

Let me digress for just a moment: these were real people in a real conflict at a real place and a real time. Yet look at how God has constructed the scene: Judas represented the individual person who rejected Jesus. The temple police represented the Jewish leadership that rejected Jesus. The Romans represented the Gentile world that rejected Jesus. In this one snapshot, we see the world rejecting Jesus.

Peter

Then we come to Peter. Peter did not reject Jesus; from a human standpoint, he failed Jesus. It may be tough to hear it that way, but that is the reality of what happened. We are going to go much deeper into Peter’s denial in the next couple of weeks, but for now I want you to see the descent into denial.

At the Passover dinner, in Chapter 13, Peter asked Jesus, “Where are you going?” Jesus responded, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward.” It was kind of cryptic, but Jesus was telling Peter that Peter could not defend him from what was coming. More, Peter *should not* defend Jesus from what was coming. Peter did not understand; “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” That is when Jesus said that Peter would deny him three times before the next morning.

In our passage, in the garden, Peter surveyed the scene as it developed and was ready to make the big stand. When Jesus said the second time, “I am he. If you are looking for me, let these men go,” Peter was ready to make his defense. He pulled his sword and struck the slave of the high priest. Initially, this looks like Peter was ready for something to start; however, it may not have been as bold as it appeared. He did not go for one of the Roman soldiers. That would have triggered a massively bad response. As long as he did not go for one of the soldiers, it was likely that the Romans would let the Temple police

handle the situation. Peter did not even go for one of the Temple police. He recognized that going against the muscle of the chief priests and scribes was an unlikely avenue for success. So, Peter went for the least: an unarmed slave of the high priest.

It is difficult to read the tone of Jesus' response to Peter. Whatever it was, it was not affirming. Jesus said, "Put your sword back into its sheath." Stop. Just stop. And then, he said, "Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?" In other words, this is happening. It is supposed to happen. You, Peter, are not bigger than God, nor do you know better than God. Stop trying to force your own will on God's plan. You will not succeed and you will only end up hurting yourself.

So Peter was rendered helpless. He thought of himself as Jesus' right-hand man, but he could not prevent Jesus from being taken into custody. All he could do was follow. Lost, confused, uncertain about what he should do next, Peter was dependent on John to get him close – to get him into the courtyard of the high priest. It was there that the woman first addressed him, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" She apparently knew that John was a disciple and was now asking Peter – and not in a particularly threatening way. Even so, he responded, "I am not."

Thus began the descent into denial.

But before we get too hard on Peter, we need to see why John was telling us about these episodes. John was not being petty about a later rivalry with Peter for prominence in the church; instead, John was pointing out that God does not need us to defend him. God does not ask us to defend him. **We** are not going to defeat the world's rejection, hatred, and rebellion against God. That was for Jesus.

Jesus

You have probably noticed that I have held off on talking about Jesus until last. There is a reason. Hear this: no matter how badly humanity plots against God, no matter how badly humanity acts in trying to defend God or in trying to follow God; no matter what humanity does, there is no point when God is not in charge. Or, to state things in the positive: despite rebellion, rejection, betrayal and denial, God is in charge.

Look again at our text: Jesus was in charge at every point in this narrative. Let me take it step by step – almost literally:

1. Jesus went to where he knew Judas would look for him. I know I have mentioned this multiple times, but we have to realize that Jesus was following as God had directed, planned, and willed. These events were unfolding exactly how God intended. Jesus did not look to dodge what was coming; rather, he had been saying – since as early as the Palm Sunday parade – "What should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."
2. In fact, Judas did come to the place to find Jesus. In contrast to the other gospels, Jesus specifically took the initiative to engage Judas. John wrote, "Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, *came forward* and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" He approached those who were going to arrest him. He asked them a question; in other words, he initiated the conversation. Jesus took control of the situation and set the stage for how the events would unfold.

3. When they answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth,” Jesus replied with, “I am he.” Then, in verse 6, we get this odd little observation, “When Jesus said to them, ‘I am he,’ they stepped back and fell to the ground.” What was that about? Well, it gets a little lost in translation, but what John wrote that Jesus said was this: *Εγώ εἰμι*. Make no mistake, Jesus revealed to them the name of God – and in awe they stepped back and fell to the ground.

Now, you may scratching your head a little bit about that, however, you need to remember what the expectation of the Messiah was. The Messiah was going to do greater things than had Moses – and Pharaoh and Pharaoh’s army had not fared very well against God working through Moses. You heard earlier the passage from Ezekiel – the vision of the heavenly host in the presence of the LORD – and Ezekiel’s reaction was the same: he fell on his face. In the presence of God, we fall down.

Here, Jesus was not merely invoking the name of God as a servant, he was using the name of God as a self-identification.

Because of the Messianic expectation, because of the commandment against using the Lord’s name in vain, and because this Jesus had already awed them at the Festival of Booths, the temple guard reacted as though they were about to be consumed in fire or by some sort of holy action.

From a theological perspective, note that Jesus claimed both his fully human name, “Jesus of Nazareth” and his fully divine name, “*Εγώ εἰμι*.” As one commenter noted, “Here the most humble and human of Jesus’ names is juxtaposed with the most exalted and divine. The two together are the crosshairs that target Jesus’ identity: he is the human being from an insignificant, small town in Galilee who is also God.”¹

4. When nothing cataclysmic happened, Jesus asked them again, “Whom are you looking for?” They responded again. He said to them, “I told you that I am he, so if you are looking for me, let these men go.” John noted how quickly Jesus’ prayer had been confirmed and answered. “This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, ‘I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.’” Jesus commanded those who were coming to take control over him – and they obeyed. Can you imagine?

In preparing for this sermon, I have had to slow down and contemplate how remarkable was Jesus’ power throughout these events. So often I gloss over these things and feel bad because Jesus looks like a victim. At no point was Jesus a victim. At no point was he anything other than who he was and as fully in charge of things as he had always been.

5. When Peter cut off the named slave’s ear, Jesus told him to put his sword back into its sheath. Peter obeyed. The soldiers, the temple police, Judas, Peter, and all the disciples were doing exactly and entirely as God had intended for things to unfold.
6. So, the soldiers (Romans) and the Jewish police – John was absolutely making the point that the entire world had aligned against him – they arrested and bound him. From a human perspective, this looked like a worst-case scenario. From a human perspective it was the world taking charge of Jesus. As we read and as I preach it, though, it is important to know: that was not what was happening; Jesus was following what God intended to do and accomplish.
7. They took Jesus to Annas. Annas was the father-in-law of the high priest that year, Caiaphas. If it seems strange that they would have taken Jesus to the high priest’s father-in-law, it is

¹ Rodney A. Whitacre, IVP NT Commentary, John, p. 424.

important to know that Annas had been the high priest for years. His five sons had been high priests after him. Now, his son-in-law. Think a dynasty like the Kennedy or Bush family roles in American history. Even though the old man did not have the official title any longer, there was no question about who was in charge and who pulled the strings.

We will talk more about Annas next week, but for now we should note that the human authorities thought they had Jesus in hand, thought that the disciples' scattering was an end to the potential riots and rebellion, and that the rest was going to be a mop-up operation. The outcome was not in doubt – either to the authorities or to Jesus.

Why am I pressing so hard on Jesus' being in control? Well, so often we feel like circumstances and events are out of control. We look around and see so many things going in the wrong direction. This week, we heard the President saying that Russian frustration with Ukraine may lead to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which would – in turn – lead to "Armageddon." That is pretty scary. We look at the economy and wonder – as costs go up and incomes remain unchanged, and a recession seems to be the plan for the Federal Reserve – how are people going to be able to afford to live? And, on that same line, if supply chains are disrupted and costs get too high for farmers and if, and if, and if...; what do we do if the grocery store shelves are empty? Have you filled up your gas tank recently? What can we do?

Why am I pressing so hard on Jesus' being in control? So often we feel like circumstances and events are out of control. As I have gotten older, physical things are more difficult. I still think of myself as being capable of doing things like I did in my late 20's and early 30's, but reality quickly sets in, and the next morning is an unpleasant reminder that time has marched along. If I take off my glasses, the world looks like I am underwater trying to see through a fish tank. It stuns me that we have four grandchildren. They are a delight – **and** - a tangible reminder that there are more years behind me than still yet ahead. I would like to stop time and dwell a little bit in the blessings, but what can I do?

Why am I pressing so hard on Jesus' being in control? So often we feel like circumstances and events are out of control. I look at the trends in church life and wonder what is going on. More and more people are unchurched. Even the churches don't look like what I remember growing up.

I grew up a mainline Presbyterian and, until coming to serve here, had been serving in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In the 3 ½ years I since coming here, I have been watching that former denomination become unrecognizable. This past week I found in the formerly mainstream Presbyterian Outlook an article entitled, "Our Place In Queer Church History." The subheading was, "Erin Angeli reflects on the worship she led with LGBTQIA+ teens about some queer saints of the church." In the article, she wrote, "Until this week these young people didn't even know queer theology existed, and you should have seen their eyes when I told them. Wonder, joy, relief, and happiness swept through them like a soft wind. I'm sure there's a word for it in another language, but in English, it just comes out as "holy" again."² How far that denomination has moved since 1996 when it had declared that God's plan for human sexuality was expressed with fidelity in the context of marriage between a man and a woman; and chastity in singleness.

This is the trend among more culturally acceptable denominations, while the culture is getting more antagonistic toward the Gospel as it is revealed in Scripture.

² <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/10/our-place-in-queer-church-history/>

In world politics, in our personal experience, in our struggles to walk faithfully to God within our spiritual lives, we so often feel like circumstances and events are out of control. When John was looking on as Judas betrayed Jesus, Peter denied Jesus, and the authorities took him into custody and began the railroad towards the cross, it must have felt like circumstances and events were out of control.

Things are not out of control. They are out of human control, yes; but they are not out of God's control. God has a plan and a purpose, just as Jesus had a plan and a purpose.

Hear this again: no matter how badly humanity plots against God, no matter how badly humanity acts in trying to defend God or in trying to follow God; no matter what humanity does, there is no point when God is not in charge. Or, to state things in the positive: despite rebellion, rejection, betrayal, and denial, God is in charge.

The coda to that is this: God's being in charge does not mean everything is going to be easy, pleasant, or smooth for believers. It is not. God is – in God's way and in God's timing – redeeming broken creation for His own purposes. Many times, God does things we do not understand in ways that we do not understand. Yet, example after example in Scripture – and example after example in our own experience – demonstrate that *through* the difficult circumstances we do not understand, God is in control and doing things to accomplish His own results.

Beyond that, we do know the end of this story. As poorly and depraved as humanity is revealed to be – how much more overwhelming and powerful is the mysterious love of God revealed in Jesus. Because he was who he said he was, there is abundant reason for hope. John wrote this gospel, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in His name.”

Amen.

Questions:

1. Does it make a difference who was in control during these events? How and why?
2. What is the difference between a hard heart and failure? How would you compare and contrast the behavior of Judas and Peter?
3. How can you have peace in the midst of a world that is antagonistic to God?