

AN OPPORTUNE TIME

God is about to do some incredible, amazing, and beautiful things. But first the humans have to have their say, try to fix it their way, try to make life safe and good by their own best wisdom and efforts. I guess we also have to find out what God's response will be to us - what God will do about it when we insist on having it our own way.

This is the night we celebrate our Lord's last supper with His disciples. To do that, we need to have our minds free to be with Him, not struggling with the details. So before we go to this communion meal, let me remind you of the setting.

The timing is like this: The Jewish nation, to which Jesus belongs, is getting ready to celebrate Passover, their most important commemoration. It is the heart of their remembrance of how God had delivered them, under the leadership of Moses, from bondage in Egypt some 1,300 to 1,500 years before Jesus was born. Jesus loved this festival at least as much as you love Christmas or Easter.

The Last Supper, we think, occurs the evening before the Passover feast. Passover will begin Friday evening when the sun goes down, the beginning of the Sabbath. So Jesus shares the Last Supper with His disciples the night before, on Thursday evening, when He tells them He longs to eat the Passover meal with them again but will not get the chance until they can all do so in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Luke 22:16) He will be dead by this time tomorrow night. He will not live to see Passover.

Maundy Thursday is loaded and laden with the immediacy of Jesus' approaching death, which the disciples cannot quite fathom or face. I still identify with them. I both do and do not understand it. I have and have not faced it. I want to enjoy the meal, and nothing is more important than being with Him, but I cannot shake the foreboding and the realization that everything has gone wrong. Love and sorrow mix and mingle, and they cloak this night with meanings and feelings beyond all utterance.

Maundy Thursday occurs on three levels all at the same time: political, relational, and personal. Jesus is in a political drama with the leaders of the Jewish state - that's political. Jesus is having a banquet

with His closest and dearest friends - that's relational. Jesus is experiencing the hardest and most crucial day of His life on the inward level of His own faith - who He is, what His truth is, what His life is for and about - that's personal.

ON THE POLITICAL LEVEL, Jesus has taken Jerusalem by storm. Since Palm Sunday, He has been teaching in the temple all day, every day, with huge crowds in approving attendance. According to the Gospels, many lawyers and doctors of the Law step forward to see if they can discredit Jesus before the people. None succeed. The Jewish temple police cannot try to arrest Jesus in broad daylight because they would be mobbed by His followers. Not only are the temple police afraid of the crowds, but a riot would bring in the Roman soldiers, and that must be avoided at all costs. So they cannot arrest Him in the daytime, and they do not know where to find Him at night.

The impact of Jesus' message and ministry is no doubt appealing to many of the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover. He is fresh and exciting, and His influence is starting to sweep far beyond the supporters who have gathered at His request. Remember that at this time in history, political power and religious power are the same thing in Israel - there is no separation of church and state. The people in leadership do not dare let Jesus carry His popular movement into the High Holy Days of Passover week. In other words, though they are not sure, they fear He may have enough influence with the masses to actually take over the leadership of the country. They also fear that if He does attempt it, whether He could win or not, the confrontation between His group and the establishment would very likely end in Roman intervention. If any disturbance even hinted at a riot, Roman soldiers would be sent in to quell it. That is not a Roman threat, that's a promise. And where is the Roman garrison? Right there at the end of the temple courtyard. The Jewish leaders know that if Roman soldiers ever move at Passover time, the result would be an enormous bloodbath - just as Jesus Himself had warned on Palm Sunday. And indeed it happened about thirty-seven years later: In 70 A.D., Rome so obliterated the Jewish nation that it no longer existed politically in our world for nearly the next nineteen hundred years - not until your lifetime. No "fun and games" going on here, friends. Jesus is playing for keeps in an extremely volatile time, and so are the Jewish leaders who oppose Him.

The political situation is that the leaders *must* stop Jesus before Passover begins. He knows this better than they do. Jesus has been planning it for years. He knows He is the Rightful King (the Messiah), and He wants the nation to accept Him for what He is. But because of *who* He is, Jesus will not coerce or use physical force. The people must choose Him of their own free will. Of course, the political leaders do *not* know Jesus' convictions on such matters. They are genuinely afraid that at some prearranged signal, all His followers will pull out weapons and attempt the usual sort of coup. As those in power begin to realize that Jesus is really serious, as they awaken to the pressure He is exerting in this already terribly dangerous time, they grow frightened, furious, and determined.

Jesus sits at the table this night knowing that the opposition will make a move. They have to. He has left them no choice. It isn't by magic that He knows. By this time, His enemies probably have a whole string of plans set in motion to apprehend Him. The pressure on His friends and disciples has become enormous. That Jesus is right, and that everybody else is wrong, isn't as clear to them as we might think. Any one of them could crack, and Jesus knows it. Every relative, parent, sweetheart, and friend of anyone close to Jesus - especially the inner twelve - is being pressured to "help us find him"; "help us to save the nation"; "we only want to talk to him"; "he's young and headstrong and doesn't realize what terrible danger he's putting us all in by stirring up the people this way"; "please, just help us find him - we only want to reason with him." Yeah, right ...

Nor is it by magic that Jesus knows that Judas has succumbed. If somebody is truly close to you, can you not tell when they change? Does a wife not know when her husband takes a lover? Does a father not know when his child has disobeyed? Do we look into each other's faces to see and read nothing? We know unless we don't want to know, or unless we haven't been paying attention. Of course we know. And in comparison to Jesus, our radar is bent and rusty. In any case, Judas Iscariot (Greek form of *Judah*), "the man from the city" (*keriotha* often used to mean Jerusalem), has more relatives and friends in the area than any of the others, and hence more pressure per square inch on him than on the others. Most of us have "betrayed" or "denied" Jesus in one way or another, for far less cause, when friends and loved ones started putting on pressure. It's not hard to understand poor Judas. When battle lines form and people start choosing up sides, and all sorts

of unverifiable information is filling the atmosphere until everything seems confusing, it's not hard to comprehend Judas' mistake. Betrayal isn't the biggest tragedy for Judas. Killing himself before he discovers forgiveness is the real tragedy.

ON THE RELATIONAL LEVEL, Jesus is saying goodbye. He wants to find ways to help His disciples remember and understand. It will be up to them now to carry on what He has started. He wants them to love and support each other. Otherwise, He knows they will have small chance of keeping the message alive. On top of that, He loves them. So He prepares a banquet for them and gives them some things to remember, and some instructions. He gives them "time-release" keys that will later reveal to them a far greater understanding of the power and extent of His love for them - and, inseparably, of God's love for them. So it is a night of sayings and images: washing feet, body broken, blood poured out. We still only dimly reach toward the full mystery and significance of it all.

THE THIRD LEVEL IS PERSONAL. Jesus is up against His own moment of truth. Is He really willing - is He able - to go through with this? Does any of it really matter enough to make it worth such a price? Will anybody actually remember, or understand, or care enough ... that He should go through with this night? This night which is about to turn into a living nightmare? The world is crass, people are self-centered, everybody eventually dies, lots of people are killed unjustly ... so what good will ever come of His throwing it all away at thirty-three?

The Last Supper is inseparable from the agony in the Garden. There is no place in or around Jerusalem where Jesus can make it through this night. But there is one place He *can* go: North! Galilee. Home. RUN! If Jesus goes back to Galilee, nobody will come after Him. In that act, He abdicates the throne. The pressure is off. He can teach, preach, heal, and tell parables to His heart's content for fifty years; the authorities might make disparaging remarks, but nobody is going to care enough to come after Him. God help me, after all these years, when it comes to this night, *I still want Him to run*. Quick! Please! Before they come! But that's the heart talking, and it doesn't *want* to understand.

Do you remember the story of Jesus in the wilderness, right after His baptism? Forty days led by the Spirit and tempted by the devil. And at the end of those days, when Jesus had not fallen for any of the temptations, the text says, “*When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*” (Luke 4:13)

All my life, I have wanted that to be a misprint, a mistake. Why can't that be one of the verses some careless scribe added later? That is not how it's supposed to be. It's supposed to read: “Jesus, having proven Himself wise and valiant beyond all the devil's wiles and expectations, convinced the devil that He was unreachable and untouchable, *and the devil never bothered Him ever again.*” That's how it's supposed to be. That's how we keep trying to pretend it is and ever shall be for us.

“*The devil departed from him until an opportune time.*” That is the real truth. That is what we need to know for ourselves, after we have seen how it was for Jesus. If the devil wouldn't leave even Jesus alone after pounding Him for forty days, do we have any reason to suspect that our own temptations are over? We think we've been through a lot, that we know some of the ropes now, and so most of the worst tests are behind us. Am I the only one who likes to spin that yarn in my mind?

There have been many “opportune times” for Satan to tempt Jesus since those classic wilderness temptations. Many people and many circumstances tried to steer Him off His course. Sometimes it was His relatives, many times it was His supporters, and even sometimes His best friends. (“*Get thee behind me, Satan,*” He said to Peter.) But this night comes the lollapalooza: a sane and sensible little temptation, a temptation to undo everything His life has been about. North. Go north. Run! It's simple. It isn't worth it. Just leave. Quick. NOW! Before they get here ... before it's too late.

As we stare at His story in wonder and compassion, can we also learn for ourselves - learn what it will take to follow Him? There is only one way to prevent Satan from continuing the endless temptations, the ceaseless efforts to booby-trap our lives: walk away from God's plans and purposes so consistently that Satan is reasonably content with us. If we are no threat to him, Satan will leave us pretty much alone. The Spirit may hound us, but not Satan.

So, what do we expect? What do we know with absolute certainty? Well, we know that if we walk with Jesus, we can keep walking *through* every temptation. But that is very different from thinking we can walk

without being tempted. So the other thing we know with absolute certainty is that Satan is always waiting for an opportune time. And from time to time, a real beauty of an opportune time will come along. Sometimes we even help set it up.

Satan will especially wait and watch for a time when we are feeling weak, tired, discouraged. He will wait for a time when we feel confused, deserted, abandoned. When we know we are weary, when we feel ineffective, when we know hope is at low ebb, then comes the lollapalooza: the temptation to undercut the whole show, and ruin everything we have worked and lived for. Of course, it may not seem like a very big temptation at the time. Just a simple “This isn’t working, let’s go north.” But it is still a clear change in direction, against all the prayers and efforts thus far.

We could talk for days about illustrations, but just one connector and you can take it from there: When do married men or women have extramarital affairs? When they are feeling good, strong, successful, and happy? When they know themselves to be part of a loving family? When they are excited about their work and their purpose here? Not very often. Most of the time, affairs are symptoms of depression, defeat, an inward discouragement, despair. Affairs are escapes into a fairytale world where, for a while, they feel more important, the center of caring attention once again. But of course the illusion doesn’t last, and the crash is great.

Affairs are a moving into sickness, not health. No wonder so few of them work. I have seen a few work, but it’s the hardest way to put a real relationship together. Both people must wake up, keep the love, find healing and forgiveness, survive all the wreckage, recommit to each other on some real and permanent basis - and if by some miracle all this is managed, then the two are only back up to zero, to the “break-even point,” to a starting place.

At an opportune time, when we are at low ebb, comes the lollapalooza: a temptation to undercut the whole show, to destroy all that we have been living for - the temptation to run away, to hide, to start over. “A geographic,” it is sometimes called.

So it is with Jesus on this night. RUN! Go north. Go home. The authorities will never bother Him again if He does that. It will be over. He will no longer be a threat, or worth their trouble. The crowds will look

for Him tomorrow and won't find Him and they will be disappointed, but they'll get over it. They don't understand any of it yet anyway. They will forget. Besides, if He stays, they will melt away when it comes to the real power play. Liking Him and thinking His mission and message are appealing are one thing; facing Roman steel is quite another. Jesus knows all this. All He has to do is start walking north. Soon ... now ... HURRY! (Can we hear Satan's drum beat?)

So Jesus tries to pray. And the voice screams at Him: "This is stupid! This is useless! Get out of here! Leave - NOW! No good will come of this. You're not the only one who might get hurt. Nobody will understand. Nobody really cares. RUN!" Jesus has wrestled with this voice before, again and again, all through the years: dear angel of logic and practical right, high angel of light - Lucifer. And what a hummer he is on this night, at this "opportune time."

What an absolutely amazing thing for us to look up, blink, and find that Jesus is still there. This is the height of the human side of the story. This is Jesus' hardest moment - and finest hour. From here on, it will be out of His hands. First, the humans will take over. After them, the fanfare and the miracle and the mystery belong to God. But this ... this is the warrior soul, and the naked commitment that Jesus brings to meet it. *Not my will but thine be done*. So Judas comes, in his terrifying innocence, and Jesus is still there. Jesus' friends and family do not want Him to be there. The Jewish authorities do not want Him to be there. The Roman authorities do not want Him to be there. The disciples do not want Him to be there. And Jesus doesn't want to be there. *Nevertheless, not my will ... and not anybody else's either*. That's what a lot of people seem to miss about Jesus. He is not living to please other humans any more than He is living to please Himself. He lives to please God, and tells the rest of us to do that too. *Thy will be done*. So Jesus is still there, waiting.

This is the night. It is going on at all three levels at once: political, relational, personal. It all culminates here. And everything - the whole mission and ministry of Jesus - stands or falls from here. It is Maundy Thursday, from the word "mandate" - Day of Command - the day of the mandate: from God to Jesus ... from Jesus to the disciples ... from there to here ... from then to now ... and to us. Will we live for ourselves, or for Him? Will we stay with Him - see it all through with Him, and for Him? Or will we run?

PRAYER

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We sometimes scream and rant and fret and swear, and say that we don't want to be on it, that we would rather be elsewhere. Until we stop and ask: Where would we rather be? On some desert isle? In some make-believe story? Perhaps in our own real world, where we are rich and privileged and blessed and fortunate, though all who are around us are starving and wretched and hopeless? No Lord, we could not stand that either. We would like to be rich to help the poor. But better to be together with the poor and the sick and the dying, than alone and rich ... or alone and well ... or alone and uncaring.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We thank You for that! We thank You for thinking us worthy of experiencing LIFE in Your dimensions. We thank You for all the joy and pain of LOVE and LIFE. Forgive us for complaining. Forgive us for wanting to escape. Welcome us anew as we turn toward You, we pray.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord. Shape us as You will. We come rough-hewn - raw material - knowing not our true design or frame. Cut away as You must. Shape and form until we understand. Give us the likeness of the One from Nazareth, the Son of Man, in whose name we pray. Amen.