

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 all their way, try to make life safe and good by their own best wisdom and efforts. Sadly, if we want in on this story, we 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.

We already know the answer from the story of the Prodigal Son: The Waiting Father. God does not burn us or cast us off. God waits for us to want to come home. Unbelievable as it is, that is our story too. From time to time most of us have to experience what it's really like when God finally says to us, "Okay, have it your own way." But that's Good Friday. Tonight we need to stay with Maundy Thursday. If we get tired of reviewing and pondering the life of Jesus, how will we ever discover the shape or patterns of our own lives – at least our own lives as they are intended to be?

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 religious holiday (when the definition still meant "holy day"). It is the heart of their remembrance of how God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt. It had happened under the leadership of Moses, some thirteen to fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born. It had established the Covenant between God and Israel on Mount Sinai, which was the most important thing of all. Jesus loved this festival at least as much as we love Christmas or Easter. (And *our* coming deliverance from bondage would be a much greater deliverance: not just deliverance from Pharaoh, but deliverance from "Sin, Death, and the Devil." And we would head into a Promised Land far greater than anything you could find anywhere on earth: the Kingdom of Heaven.)

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) Jesus will be dead by this time tomorrow night. He will not live to see this Passover. He will not live to see the sun go down on Friday.

Maundy Thursday is loaded and laden with the immediacy of Jesus' approaching death, which the disciples cannot 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 Jesus, but I cannot shake the foreboding and the realization that everything is going 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 struggle with the leaders of the Jewish state – that is political. Jesus is having a banquet with His closest and dearest friends – that is relational. Jesus is experiencing the hardest and most crucial day of His earthly life on the inward level of His own faith – who He is, what His truth is, what His life is for and about – that is personal. It does not get any more personal than that.

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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 and probably start a riot. 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 Jesus in the daytime, and they do not know where to find Him at night. That is part of Jesus' strategy. There are no streetlights or flashlights, and a lamp or a candle does not throw very much light. Jesus stays with friends at Bethany, a mile and a half up the ridge from the temple. The Garden of Gethsemane is across the Kidron Valley on the way to Bethany. Jesus is a lot smarter and a much better strategist than most people seem to realize.

The impact of Jesus' Message and ministry is 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, 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, they fear that Jesus may have enough influence with the crowds to actually take over the leadership of the nation.

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 hints at a riot, Roman soldiers would be sent in to quell it. That is not a Roman threat; that is a promise. And where is the Roman garrison? Right there on the edge of the temple courtyard. The Jewish leaders know that if Roman soldiers intervene at Passover time, the result would be an enormous bloodbath – just as Jesus Himself had warned on Palm Sunday. And indeed this very thing happened about thirty-seven years later: in 70 A.D., Rome so obliterated the Jewish nation that it did not exist politically in our world for almost nineteen hundred years – not until your lifetime. This is no “fun and games” going on here, friends. Jesus is playing for keeps in an extremely volatile situation, and so are the Jewish leaders who oppose Him. Knowing what life is like in this broken world, we should have more compassion and understanding for these leaders than most people do. That does not mean we should agree with them, but who among us would not have considered siding with them had we been alive at the time?

The political situation is that the Jewish 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 weapons from under their cloaks and attempt the usual sort of coup. As those in power begin to realize that Jesus is really serious – as they awaken to the influence and pressure He is exerting in this already terribly dangerous time – they grow frightened, furious, and determined.

Jesus sits at the table with His disciples this night knowing that the opposition will make a move. They have to. He has left them no other choice. It is not by some kind of magic that He knows this. 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 is not 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. He is young and headstrong and doesn’t realize what terrible danger he is putting us all in by stirring things up this way. Please, just help us find him. Tell us where he goes after sundown. We only want a chance to talk to him – a chance to reason with him. We know he is a wonderful teacher and has impressive gifts of healing, and he is doing lots of good. We will even make a contribution to your movement, just to show our good faith.” Yeah, right... Have any of you ever been in a church fight where everybody plays fair and tells the truth?

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 and see and read nothing? We know unless we do not want to know, or unless we have not been paying attention. *Of course* we know. And in comparison to Jesus, our radar is bent and rusty. In any case, Judas Iscariot – whose name is the 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 there is more pressure per square inch on Judas than on any of the others.

Most of us have “betrayed” or “denied” Jesus in one way or another, for far less cause, when friends or loved ones started applying pressure and called our beliefs into question. It is not hard to understand poor Judas. When battle lines form and people start choosing up sides and all sorts of unverifiable information is flying around everywhere until everything seems confusing, it’s hard to keep clear and steady. It is not really hard to comprehend Judas’ mistake. Betrayal is not the biggest tragedy for him. Killing himself before he discovers Jesus’ forgiveness is the real tragedy.

Jesus loved Judas and needed him to help carry the Message of a Gospel about love and forgiveness that is far deeper than betrayal.

It took the Resurrected Jesus several years to find a replacement – somebody deeply imbedded in betrayal and murder who, once forgiven, could understand the true heights and depths of the Gospel. Jesus finally found who He was looking for in some jerk from Tarsus on his way to Damascus to kill Christians. That’s the short version, but it will have to do for now.

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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 no chance of keeping the Message alive. On top of that, He loves them. So He prepares a banquet for them, and He gives them some things to remember and some instructions. He gives them “time-release” comments 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 perceive the full mystery and significance of it all.

Even though we do not fully comprehend all of it at any one time, it is essential – imperative, really – that we hear and hold on to a couple of the larger truths that Jesus tells us at this meal. First, the cup and the wine: It is a NEW COVENANT sealed in His blood. We cannot stay with the Old Covenant or we will lose the New Covenant. This will be the biggest and toughest issue we will face as we move into our New Life in Christ Jesus.

Second, Maundy Thursday is the transition between life with the physical “Jesus of Nazareth” and LIFE with the Resurrected Jesus – the Holy Spirit. All of Jesus’ faithful followers will have to make this leap. So among all of the commands of Maundy Thursday, the command to “remember Him” is paramount. What does Jesus tell us that this meal, this Last Supper, this communion with Him is primarily for and about? “*Do this in remembrance of me.*”

I know people who hear this all of their lives and never really *hear* it. It’s just filler, some nice sentiment, or just the way the Gospel writers happened to word it. Only, one of the things we know about Jesus, if we *do* remember Him, is that He is seldom careless or thoughtless or semiconscious about the things He does and says. WE often are, but He seldom is. “*Do this in remembrance of me.*”

This is not egotism. Jesus is telling His followers that they need to remember Him or they will not be able to make the transition – they will not be able to know and trust the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will be Jesus in His higher identity. And if they know the mind and heart of Jesus, they will know the mind and heart of the Holy Spirit. “Let me introduce you to a friend of mine. Actually, it is still ME.” Jesus makes this coming transition really clear in a number of places, and especially in the Gospel of John. It is fascinating that so many of us still miss it, even though this transition is the heart and core of our New WAY.

Why do some of us get into Disciple Bands and study the Gospel of Luke together? And go over it again and again? It is our primary source of information about Jesus. It is our way of remembering Him; of learning more and more about Him; of understanding more and more about what He taught us, what He cared about, how He thinks, how He decides things, and how He stayed so faithful to God. “*Do this in remembrance of me.*”

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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 horrible, living nightmare? The world is crass, people are self-centered, everybody eventually dies, and lots of people are killed unjustly, so what good will ever come of His throwing His life 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! Home. Galilee. RUN! If Jesus goes back to Galilee, nobody will come after Him. In that act, He abdicates the throne. The pressure will be off. He can teach and preach and heal and tell parables to His heart’s content for fifty years; the authorities might make disparaging remarks, but nobody will care enough to come after Him. He can fall in love, get married, raise a family – live a normal life. God help me but after all these years, when it comes to this night, *I still want Him to run.* Quick! Please!! Before the temple police come!!! But that is the heart talking, and at such times the heart does not *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 Satan's temptations and traps, 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, a bad translation. Why is that not one of the verses some careless scribe added in later? That is not how it is supposed to be. It is 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 is how it is supposed to read. That is what it is supposed to say. That is how we keep trying to pretend it is or should be or will be ... for us.

Sometimes we spend a lot of time and waste a lot of life trying to make up life the way we think it ought to be, instead of dealing with it as we find it. Of course, we really *can* deal with life according to who we are and what we have become. There is no comment here about acceptance or resignation – no pretended excuse for becoming well-adjusted in a sinful, broken world. Jesus was certainly the High Priest of living for a greater Kingdom, even though *we* are still caught in this world. But that's a far cry from make-believe: from pretending that things are what we want them to be, that we are like what we wish to be, or that we have already arrived at what we are supposed to be.

"*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 would not leave even Jesus alone after pounding Him for forty days, do we have reason to suspect that our own temptations are over? We think we have been through a lot and that we know some of the ropes now, and so most of the worst tests are behind us. Or am I the only one who likes to put this kind of spin on things? I am old and experienced and know how the Christian Life is supposed to work now, so I can relax – I can let my guard down.

The truth is that there were many "opportune times" for Satan to tempt Jesus after those classic wilderness temptations. Many people and many circumstances tried to steer Him off His course. The easy and obvious temptations came from His enemies. But sometimes it was His relatives, many times it was His supporters, and even sometimes it was His best friends. ("*Get thee behind me, Satan,*" He said

to Peter – not to the high priests, the Sanhedrin, or the Pharisees.) But on Maundy Thursday, on this night, comes the lollapalooza: a sane and sensible little temptation – a temptation to undo everything Jesus’ life has been about: North. Go north. Run! It’s simple: It’s not worth it. Nobody will ever know or care. 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 what it will take to follow Jesus? There is only one way to prevent Satan from offering up the endless temptations and the ceaseless efforts to booby-trap our lives: Walk away from God’s plans and purposes so consistently that Satan is reasonably pleased with us. If we are no threat to his purposes, if we are even on his side from time to time, Satan will pretty much leave us alone. The Spirit may hound us, but Satan will not.

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* any temptations. 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 to 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 – the temptation to ruin everything we have worked and lived for. Of course, it will not *seem* like a very big temptation at the time. Just a simple, “This is not working. This is not worth the trouble that’s coming. Let’s go north.” But it will still be a clear change in direction, against all the prayers and efforts thus far.

We could talk for weeks 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, 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 fairy-tale world where, for a little while, people feel more important – the center of caring attention once again. But of course the illusion does not 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 is 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, and recommit to each other on some real and permanent basis. Even if all this is managed, the two have only arrived at zero, the “break-even point” – 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, or 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 and will no longer be worth their trouble. The crowds will look for Him tomorrow and not find Him, and they will be disappointed but will get over it. They do not understand any of it yet anyway. They will forget and go back to their own lives. Besides, if Jesus stays, they will melt away when it comes to the real power plays. 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 in the night. But soon ... now ... HURRY! (Can we hear Satan’s drumbeat?)

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 are not the only one who might get hurt. Nobody will understand. Nobody really cares. RUN!” But Jesus has wrestled with this voice before, again and again, all through the years. We all have. Dear angel of logic and practical right ... high angel of light ... LUCIFER. And what a hummer he is on, this night – this “opportune time.”

What an absolutely amazing thing for us to look up, to blink, and to find that Jesus is still there, waiting. This is the height of the human side of His 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 on Good Friday. After them, the fanfare and the miracle and the mystery belong to God on Easter. But this is Maundy Thursday – the Day of Command – and the epitome of the choices and temptations

that confront Jesus. This is the warrior soul – and the naked commitment that He brings to meet it. “*Not my will but thine be done.*” So Judas comes, in his terrifying innocence, and Jesus is still there, waiting.

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 does not want to be there. *Nevertheless, not my will ... AND NOT ANYBODY ELSE’S WILL EITHER.* That is what a lot of us keep missing 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 He tells the rest of us to do that too. *Thy will be done.* So when they come to arrest Him, Jesus is still there, waiting.

Dear friends, our journey – what we call the Christian Life – is a journey between two gardens. In the Garden of Eden, we end up saying, “Not Thy will but mine be done.” In the Garden of Gethsemane, we end up saying, “*Not my will but Thine be done.*” Everything else is just steps along the WAY.

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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?

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THIS DOCUMENT AND ANY RECORDING
ARE DUE TO COMBINING REWORKED VERSIONS OF THIS SERMON
INTO ONE DEFINITIVE TEXT VERSION.

COMMUNION

The Scripture reading included the words of institution for the communion meal. I love the Congregational way of taking communion together as the body of Christ that worships and serves together. But sometimes it is also an individual affair, even though we are together. Tonight it is especially appropriate for us to each come alone. Let us each prepare our heart, then approach the Lord's table with humble daring. What is it that Jesus offers here for you? And what does it take for you to be willing to receive it? There is nothing between you and the altar/table this night. Nothing except you. So, each in our own way ... each in our own time ...

TIME WITH THE SPIRIT Implications and Applications

We are not seeking the usual vows this week of one promise to keep and one thing to lighten the load. We are shifting our focus a bit. I never get tired of contemplating Jesus' story, but finding my own place and part in His story is never easy for me. And without vigilance and the Spirit's help, I do get slothful from time to time.

Humans are never the Creator – never the primary source of anything – though some of us continually forget or obscure this truth. Jesus was the greatest Leader we have ever seen because He was the greatest follower – the most obedient servant – of God we have ever seen. He is the True and Rightful King because He recognized and trusted the higher authority of God.

When Jesus went off to pray in the Garden, much of it was to keep this “chain of command” really clear in a time and a situation where very few humans could or would have kept it clear. The disciples needed to pray too, to keep such things clear on their own level. But they slept instead. It is nearly impossible not to. Spiritual weariness makes physical eyes very heavy. Sloth is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Staying awake spiritually looks too big, too difficult, too vague, too complicated. “We'll get to it later.” And in our day and time there are endless distractions, endless substitutes, endless ways to go to sleep spiritually. Satan, if they forgot to tell you, is often the quintessential Sandman.

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So if Jesus is the True and Rightful King, where and who are the true and rightful subjects and servants of the King? Ah, there you are!

Of course, this is no more fated or automatic than being the True King. What is your identity, and have you declared it? What part are you being asked to play, and are you playing it? As the Scriptures have always declared: If we trust and follow Jesus, our lives in some way will mirror the patterns He reveals. We will run into some of the same temptations, and into the same Tempter. We will run into some of the same opposition, and into many of the same opportunities and joys. We may even discover that some of our friends have gone to sleep when we really needed them and that they will not be any help for a while – not until after a rooster’s cry and a new awakening.

In any case, this night is far more than a celebration of past events, no matter how amazing and revealing they are. We will each take just a few minutes now to be open to the Spirit. But after the benediction, most of us will want and need to return to our unhurried prayers. He is the True and Rightful King, but only for those who are His true and loyal subjects. That called Him to His prayers. And it calls us to ours.