

“...not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost.” Scripture gives us only two particulars about Judas Iscariot: that Jesus chose him as an apostle, and that Judas handed Jesus over to the authorities. Two thousand years later, we still don’t quite know what to do with Judas, but one thing seems certain: Judas could not have been totally evil despite how we have portrayed him. Jesus, presumably a shrewd judge of character, must have seen some redeeming qualities in the man and Judas, for his part, must have seen Jesus as someone worthy of making the life-altering sacrifices required to become a follower.

So why did Judas do what he did? What were his motivations? What was on his heart and mind?

Our readings from John’s Gospel and Luke’s Acts of the Apostles this morning offer explanations for his behavior, but we only hear *about* Judas, never *from* Judas. Our Gospel reading is situated on the evening of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. Judas has just left the table, and Jesus is praying aloud that God will protect those whom God has given him after he is no longer with them. Jesus guarded these people in the name that God gave him, losing not one of them except, of course, Judas, “the one destined to be lost so that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”

The reading from Acts picks up the action after Jesus’ death. The apostles are in the midst of a crowd and because Judas is, of course, no longer with them, Peter is advocating for the election of someone to take Judas’s place. To be a true apostle, in Peter’s estimation, the replacement must be someone who has been a witness to all the major events of Jesus’ life like the others. After all, whoever replaces Judas will be one whom God has chosen to take the same place in ministry and apostleship that Judas turned aside to go to his own place.

“Friends,” Peter says by way of explanation, “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled.”

Such a human response, isn't it? Scripture foretold it, consequently, it had to happen. The authors of our readings today needed to explain Judas and his betrayal of Jesus and they came to the kind of conclusion that we still so often come to: Scripture had to be fulfilled. Today, we might say something like, “It was meant to be” or “It was all part of God's plan.” Even John's Jesus says, “Not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost.”

Well, they do have a problem to work out, don't they, these people who captured our sacred stories? Jesus, the Messiah, the son of the living God, has handpicked a group of people to be his disciples—to live out his mission-- and one of the people that Jesus chose in the early days of his earthly ministry is the one who handed him over to the authorities, and helped in the arrest that ended with crucifixion and death.

Maybe the Biblical writers thought that if the choices Judas made were just fulfilling scripture, then Jesus was still right to bring Judas into the inner circle. The recently discovered *Gospel of Judas* goes so far as to claim that Judas was simply obeying a request from Jesus himself. Maybe saying that Judas and his actions “were meant to be” is a recognition that saboteurs just seem to arise whenever a creative new movement emerges, especially ones that threaten dominating powers of empire. Or maybe it's simply a reflection of the very human tendency to attribute meaning and purpose while looking in the rear view mirror, especially when bad things happen to us or to those we love.

Such human responses, all of them; reasonable and uncluttered, but it's that very “reasonableness” makes me wonder whether these are really Godly responses. I do trust that all things are in God's hands. I trust that God loves us in ways far deeper and more mysteriously than we can ever know. And that is precisely why I am troubled by the phrase: “not one of them was lost except the one *destined* to be lost.” Fortunately, there are numerous versions of the text

that give us an alternative: in the Greek, the phrase is not “the one destined to be lost,” but rather “the son of perdition” or “the son of destruction.” The Aramaic, the English Standard, the Douay-Rheims, even the King James translations all prefer this alternative. It may seem a minor distinction, but it has enormous implications: Judas, as “the son of perdition,” was not lost against his will—he was not lost, that is to say, because of some inescapable predestined fate. Judas was lost by his own choice, by his own consent.

More awesome still, God worked with that choice to bring life out of death. That’s what it means to say “It was meant to be.” Not the betrayal. Not the crucifixion. Love, forgiveness, reconciliation... *these* are meant to come into being. God’s choice to grant us free will means that our choices sometimes derail what God desires—maybe our choices disrupt God’s yearning often. And yet, God works in and through those derailments to create paths that liberate.

We see God’s corrective hand in the story from Acts, when dear, earnest and frequently misguided Peter calls the people to action. He is intent on making the apostles whole again—getting the band back together, so to speak—by restoring their membership to the holy number of twelve. Peter’s goal was to get the group back to the number that correctly reflected the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. In that way, he figured, they would be ready to gather in all Jewish people into the new Christian way. Peter acted then in much the same way that the institutional church still does, calling for an orderly discernment process with qualified, insider candidates. And with the toss of the dice, Matthias is chosen.

And then we never hear of Matthias again.

Peter’s insistence on due process, on correct and orderly action, were based on reasonable, assumptions about how God worked in the past. But what resulted was a minor misfire. Even still, once again God brought good out of what may have been a wrong choice. After the apostles’ reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, there was an even more mysterious and disorderly election of

sorts—the choice of a Christian persecutor, a Jew named Saul of Tarsus to become the twelfth apostle. It was this Saul, who became the apostle Paul, who opened the floodgates of a Jewish renewal movement in a manner that the original twelve never could, and without the properly elected Matthias.

God brought forth a measure of meaning, reconciliation and forgiveness from Peter's poor choice, and an explosion of love from the deathly choice that Judas made—an outburst of love that bathes creation to this day. So what do we do with Judas? Do we condemn him? Do we applaud him?

Several decades ago, Biblical scholar William Barclay suggested the possibility that Judas handed Jesus over to the Romans in a misguided effort to force Jesus' hand, to get him to act decisively. Maybe, Barclay mused, maybe Judas expected that the arrest would prompt Jesus to reveal himself as the long-awaited messiah by overthrowing the Roman occupiers. None of the other traditional interpretations explain why Judas became so despondent after the crucifixion that he committed suicide. In other words, according to Barclay, only if Judas had expected a measure of good to come from his actions would suicide make any sense.

Why did Judas do what he did? Probably because Judas, like most of us, wanted to make God in his own image, rather than the other way around. Jesuit author Fr. James Martin has suggested that Judas, like you and I so often do, simply wanted a God based on his own assumptions—in this case, an avenging God who would serve justice by tossing out the hated occupiers and restoring the fortunes of the people of Israel.

What Judas (and you and I) got instead was very different: a suffering God who willingly accepted a shameful death on a cross. Isn't it tragic that Judas did not wait to see what happened on Easter morning?

Perhaps what we should do with Judas is to let him serve as a reminder of what God has done for all—to remember the love that God has for Judas and for

each and every human being. If God is willing to forgive Judas and to bring light out of his darkness, imagine what is possible for you and me.

Next week, we will celebrate the feast day of the coming of the Spirit among the disciple; the Spirit who course-corrected Peter's actions and brought the apostle Paul into the Christian communion of saints; the same Holy Spirit who will bless us by bringing two young women into the fold. Two weeks after that, we will move into Ordinary time, a season when we may be tempted to relax into our untested assumptions about God in ways that limit the wild mystery of the Spirit in action. Better, instead, to be prepared to step away from the orderly comfort of "it was meant to be" and join the newly baptized in the wild river of God's living Spirit, the river of living water that brings forth, even from our missteps, the liberation, love and life that reveal God's joyful glory flooding all of creation.