

John 18:3-9

MW Lent 4, March 23, 2022
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So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴ Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" ⁵ They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶ When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. ⁷ So he asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." ⁸ Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go." ⁹ This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one."

In John's gospel, there are times when Jesus intentionally keeps His identity hidden, at least initially. Think, for instance, about His long conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well—that's from John chapter 4. They chatted about a number of things that day, and Jesus was ministering to her soul when she said, "Well, I know that the Messiah is coming." It was at that point when finally Jesus said, "I, the one speaking to you, **I Am He.**" In other Gospel accounts, you might remember how many different times Jesus told His disciples or the people whom He had healed not to tell anyone that He was the Christ, but instead to "keep quiet."

But here in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, there was none of that. "**Whom do you seek?**" He asked. The mob replied, "**Jesus of Nazareth.**" The time had come. No more hints, no more "hush, hush." "**I Am He.**" Jesus said. Three words loaded with truth. But what truth? Well, the truth that this Jesus of Nazareth is **The Almighty God, The Humble Servant, and The Faithful Shepherd.**

I want you to try to imagine what it must have been like to be Jesus on that dark night. The garden had been quiet except for the sounds of Jesus wrestling in prayer with His Father out of the anguish of His soul. But then, after waking up His disciples several times, He went out to meet a band of miscreants who were coming out towards Him *from the Temple area*, of all places. This angry mob was coming in the dark with torches and swords and clubs—a group made up of temple guards and temple servants and Roman soldiers.

It was the Sanhedrin, the rulers of the Temple, who had ordered them to head to the garden that night, in order to arrest the man who had the potential to incite the crowds into rioting. "We'd better do it at night, when everyone's sleeping," they said, so as not to incite the masses. And so, they came at night, led by a member of Jesus' own inner circle of trust, Judas Iscariot.

Imagine being in Jesus' shoes, looking into the faces of these men. John really uses an understatement in our text, when he says, "**Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to Him.**" This wasn't just some educated guess, nor was Jesus simply seeing the angry mob and putting two and two together to figure out what was going to happen next. Jesus knew it all. As true God, He knew what was going to happen to Him.

And He knew every man standing there and threatening Him that night—disciple, temple guard, Roman soldier—He could scan every face in the crowd and tell you each one's name. He knew their parents and their grandparents and their great-grandparents. He knew their family history. He could have sat down with them and traced back the lineage of each Jewish man there all the way back to

Abraham, could have traced each Roman's lineage back to Noah. He knew why they were there, and He also knew the events of each one's life that led them to standing there before Him. Ultimately, the Son of God knew them all so personally because He had created them all.

And there they were, His own handiwork, coming to arrest, abuse, mock, flog, and kill Him. Here they were to bring Him to a sham trial in order to falsely accuse Him. As Almighty God, Jesus knew all that was going to happen to Him, and then with three little words, "***I Am He,***" he knocked down this crowd of maybe upwards of a hundred men backwards onto the ground. No, this wasn't them giving Him a little bit of breathing room—this was Jesus' almighty power on display. Never for a second was He not in control of what was going on.

Those in the crowd should have stopped and thought about this as they were getting back up, don't you think? Getting knocked down to the ground like that, you'd think that would have been somewhat of a wakeup call for them! But they were all under orders, and the Roman soldiers especially were known for obeying orders. The marvel of all this, though, is that Jesus just allowed it to happen. Even though He had all the wisdom and power to make a thousand different plans for saving the world, in the mystery of His love, *this* was the plan. An angry mob coming under the cover of dark to take Him in secret.

I often think that it is this humble service of Jesus that amazes us so much. It's so foreign to our prevailing attitudes. We are each born with a self-centered heart and mind; we naturally look to our own interests first. We all like to be considered as those that look to serve others, but when it really comes down to it, we don't like being treated like servants. Eventually the truth comes out, we really mostly want to serve ourselves. It's exactly that kind of pride, that self-centered interest, which causes so many problems in our relationships with God and with one another.

Judas was there that night, we see him standing there, selfishness and pride personified—and we should take note of his presence. Like we talked about in our sermon on Sunday, "***Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.***" (1 Corinthians 10:12) If we ever think we are pillars of strength who would never turn away from or give up our faith in Jesus, we need to look deep into Judas' eyes and see what sin is capable of doing. If we chase after it, it will seize control of our hearts and destroy us just like it did to him.

Look at everyone else in the crowd as well; they all came for their own selfish reasons as well. They also came with weapons because they were expecting some resistance; after all, any self-respecting person would put up at least a little bit of a fight, and besides, Jesus' other disciples would be with Him, so you could expect some punches to be thrown. Undoubtedly, that's how the crowd expected Jesus to respond to this injustice—in a human way. That's what they would have done, "You're not taking me without a fight." Even Peter thought the same thing, standing over there, as he pulled out his sword and swung it at one of the temple servants.

Peter's pride had been wounded that evening. At supper, he had said nothing could possibly drive him to betray Jesus, and yet just an hour later he had been caught napping when Jesus asked him to watch and pray. As he swung the sword, he must have thought that this was the redemption he needed. *This* would help polish his tarnished image.

And then look at Jesus. What a contrast; standing there calmly, He simply says, ***“I Am He.”*** He was not going to have one of His disciples take the fall for Him; He was not going to have one of His disciples impersonate Him in the dark of the evening so that He could slip away safely. ***“I Am He.”*** Jesus said it twice. The crowd still wasn’t sure, they needed Judas to give them a sign and kiss the one that truly was Jesus; they need to be absolutely sure they got the right guy. But Jesus wanted the same. He also wanted to make sure that they took Him, the right guy. ***“I Am He.”***

This is why He came into the world. He came ***“not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”*** (Matthew 20:28) He came to humble Himself and become obedient, even to the point of death on a cross.

Now, in the midst of all this darkness, we see a very toughing moment—and certainly very comforting to us as well—we see Jesus, in this tense, awful situation, still showing His great love for His people. Earlier in John’s gospel, He had said, ***“I Am the good shepherd.”*** (John 10:11) And in the darkness of Gethsemane, He was keeping watch over His flock by night. ***“If you are looking for me, let these men go,”*** Jesus said. This happened so that the words He had spoken would be fulfilled ***“I have not lost one of those you gave to me.”*** Imagine that! The man the mob came to get is now the one giving orders.

More than that, He is watching out for His disciples—not just for their physical safety but for their spiritual safety as well. Seeing Him hang on the cross the next day would be a tremendous test of their faith in Him. If they were all also to witness all the humiliating trials and horrible beatings and mocking and spitting and flogging—maybe that would have been too much for them. Instead, He would spare them and go alone, as the Scriptures foretold. Defiant sinners would strike Him, the shepherd, and His sheep would scatter. Even so, He would not lose any of those whom the Father had entrusted to His care. It was best for them to go now; this was best for their souls.

Yet there is even more love here—even to the end, the faithful shepherd was still seeking after that lost sheep, Judas. He tenderly pleaded with Judas as Judas kissed Him. But Judas stepped back into his crowd. So, He knocked Judas backward too, with the others, to warn him of what he was doing and the danger his soul was in. So, did Jesus lose Judas? No. Judas rejected Jesus on His own and ran headlong away into eternal death.

But you! You, who repent of your sins and cling to this same Jesus in faith—look at who is protecting you. It is He. He protects you with His almighty power. He laid down His life for the flock, for you. And no one is able to rip you out of either His hand or His Father’s hand. You are His, and He will not lose you either.

So then, we have this great hope, not because of who we are—not how strong we are, not how committed we are, not even how strong our faith might be. Without *Him*, we are nothing and can do nothing. Rather, we are left with this great hope because of who He is. And who is He? ***“I Am He,”*** Jesus says. He is the one who is truly **Almighty God**. And yet, He is also the one who came as a **Humble Servant** to redeem you. And He is the one who is with you always, every day **Shepherding** you to eternal life. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen.