

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Betrayed: To the Bitter End”
Mark 14:26-31

We pick up where we left off last week in the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark in week two of our Lenten sermon series “Betrayed.” We started Lent 10 days ago on Ash Wednesday looking at Jesus’ anointing at Bethany, then last Sunday at his last supper with his disciples, at which point he informs them all that one of them would betray him, bitterly right before he establishes this sacramental meal of communion with them, a table that he would call them to come back together at, again and again, to remember his body that would be broken and his blood that would be shed. There’s no shortage of dissonance there: that in Christ’s modeling a meal for us, a meal of forgiveness, community, sacrifice, it would also be a stark reminder of how he was betrayed. Those are, after all, often the first words said over the communion table, as given by the Apostle Paul: “On the night he was betrayed.”

One thread that the Gospel puts forward over and over in Christ’s final 24 hours is that he is seemingly systematically abandoned by nearly everyone close to him. Jesus had just revealed that one of them, only one of them, would betray him, but he’s about to up the ante.

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Jesus was probably not in a singing mood. Or maybe he was, I don’t know, he is Jesus after all. At least I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have been.

Mark tells us in v. 26 that “they had sung the hymn,” and then went out to a place called the Mount of Olives, a small ridge just to the east of the city overlooking the Temple Mount. So they were in Jerusalem, observing Passover in the upper room of someone’s house, and then they headed out of the city on the way back to Bethany, a nearby village where they had been staying.

And that singing they did before they left was presumably a closing hymn to the Passover meal. And after the meal that they had had, I’m wondering whether Jesus, or any of them for that matter, was in a singing mood. Because I wouldn’t have been.

You have to remember the kind of meal they’re all coming from. They were coming from a meal where there were some touching moments, I’m sure, some warm words of Jesus calling them to share bread and cup in remembrance of him, but it had to have been a pretty awkward meal. Jesus drops the bomb and says one of his closest followers would betray him. They all protest, saying “Couldn’t be me, right?” But Jesus didn’t save that little tidbit for the end of the meal. It was right in the middle of it, right in the middle of this ceremonial meal, so they were stuck. It got really awkward, and they couldn’t go anywhere, because the meal kept going. It’d be like being a guest at someone’s home for dinner, but then you realize that two of the people there had just had a big argument in another room, and you can totally tell, but you can’t exactly leave because you just sat down to eat, so you kind of just stare down at your plate until it’s safe to come up for air. That’s how awkward I think it is at this point.

Add into that the heartbreak Jesus must have felt, knowing that everything he was saying wasn't just conjecture. It was going to happen, whether the disciples believed it at the time or not; it was going to happen. And not just the one person betraying him, but all of them, all of them abandoning him, which is what he tells them in v. 27, "You will all become deserters: for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'"

Then Peter, the one who thinks himself first among them, the one who sees fit to make sure he's usually the one doing the talking, doesn't take kindly to that, and since he's certainly not above putting himself above everybody else, says, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." Well good for you, Peter, but guess what, you will in fact deny even knowing me three times before the night is over. Does he believe that? Of course not. He says, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you."

And not to be outdone, all the other disciples chime in and say the same. I mean, it's almost comical if it wasn't so heartbreaking, listening to these men fall over each other trying to proclaim undying loyalty, right to the bitter end. And all the while, Jesus knows, he knows none of them would stand by their words.

Imagine the pain he must be feeling, knowing that this was about to happen, telling them that it would happen, and just to compound things, they don't believe him. I don't think Jesus was the eye-rolling sort, but put anybody else, any one of us in his shoes, and the second Peter starts talking, our eyes are going into the back of our head. Enough with the false piety. Enough with the bravado. Enough with the displays of "See how much more faithful I am than these folks."

Put all that together, and I can't imagine that Jesus was in a singing mood when they sang that hymn at the end of that meal when they went out into the evening. Or at least I wouldn't have been. And it can be pretty unpleasant having to sing when you're really not in a singing mood.

It's frustrating enough getting a song stuck in your head when you don't want it to be. Don't get me wrong, I'm all about having a good song going along with you; it just has to suit the occasion or it's annoying. Like, on Sundays after the worship service, I'll often end up with whatever the last hymn was stuck in my head as I head out from the church. That's alright. Or, if you're doing a long drive and you get Willie Nelson's "On the road again, just can't wait to get on the road again" stuck in your head. That's alright. Or, Queen's "We Will Rock You" stuck in your head before a ballgame. That's alright. Those are all alright, because they suit the occasion.

But it's not so alright when you get a song stuck in your head that you didn't want there. Things like a commercial jingle, or a catchy pop song. You hear it once, and there it stays, on repeat, over and over. Doesn't matter what you're doing, you're humming along to, "Like a good neighbor, State Farm is..." whether you like it or not.

Turns out there's a science behind how we get songs stuck in our head. Not all that complicated. First, you have to know the melody, and second you have to hear or be reminded of the melody and not hear it finished. Here's what that means: if you listen to a song all the way through to the end, not as likely that it gets stuck in your head. But if you listen to a song half way through, halfway through the catchy chorus, you can bet that'll get stuck in your head.

But even though those are more just annoying than anything else, what if it's a song that really doesn't fit the occasion? It can be kind of jarring, even unsettling.

And I wonder whether that was a bit of what was going on for Jesus and his disciples.

You see, the hymn that they sang at the end of their Passover meal was a ritual hymn, and though no one knows for sure what exactly they sang, it's not unlikely that it was one of the

psalms that have been used to end the Passover ritual for centuries. They're called the hallel, a Hebrew word for praise. And in one tradition at least—again no one knows what the exact practice would have been for Jesus and his disciples—but in one tradition at least, the final psalm in the hallel was Psalm 136, and these are the final verses that would have been sung: “It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever; and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures forever who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.” You can hear just from those few verses that every other line is “for his steadfast love endures forever,” and that’s the case throughout the entire psalm: “His steadfast love endures forever,” over and over again. These could have been the words echoing in the upper room when Christ and his disciples went out into the evening, the words echoing in Jesus’ mind as they walked in the darkness. When he looked around and saw all these people, all of his closest followers, who would abandon him, the words he couldn’t get out of his head were, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

Imagine what it’d be like. All the people around you are about to abandon you, you know it, you tell them, but instead of examining themselves with penitence, they all try to one-up each other, and all the while, the melody you can’t shake, the words you can’t get out of your head are, “His steadfast love endures forever.” It’d be enough to set me off. Bad enough to have to be there, bad enough to know what was coming, bad enough to be surrounded those more interested in showy displays of faith than actual faithfulness, but then to have those words, “His steadfast love endures forever,” on repeat throughout would absolutely send me over the edge, and I definitely wouldn’t be in a singing mood.

But then maybe Jesus was. Maybe those words, “His steadfast love endures forever,” were precisely what Jesus wanted to have in his ear the whole time. As Jesus gets closer and closer to the cross, to his hour of trial and pain, the burden within him is growing more acute, which we’ll see next week. It doesn’t lessen his resolve; he knew what he had to do; but singing the Passover hymns, with this refrain of “His steadfast love endures forever,” perhaps reinforces who God is, who he is, and just what kind of demonstration he is being led to make for the sake of the world. Maybe that’s what Jesus wanted to have in his ear the whole time: these words of praise of the everlasting love of God.

Maybe it’s even what the disciples needed to have in their ear too. Maybe it’s what we need in ours.

Maybe the words that we need more of this Lenten season echoing in our minds, echoing in these halls, echoing in our homes aren’t words proclaiming our faithfulness to God, not because they’re bad words to say but because we don’t live up to them, because we hear them wrongly and think more of ourselves than we should, because we give ourselves credit and puff ourselves up for the faith we think we have. Maybe the words we need more of aren’t words proclaiming our faithfulness to God, but God’s faithfulness to us. Because even as the tides rise and fall, even as seasons come and go, even as the closest of friends fall away, his steadfast love endures forever.

And what could have possibly led this man to sing these words when this was about to happen?

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul

What wondrous love is this, O my soul

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**