

May 12, 2024
Seventh Sunday of Easter
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Acts 1:12–26

THE GORY DEATH THAT IS GLORIOUS.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Bible is full of bloody and gory stories, true accounts of actual events that happened at a specific time and place in history. Sometimes when we tell these stories, we try to sanitize it and smooth over the parts we're uncomfortable with. Beginning with Cain killing his brother Abel in the book of Genesis – all the way to the white robed martyrs standing before the throne and the Lamb in the book of Revelation, the gory stories are in the Bible for a reason. In them we witness God's righteous anger and wrath against sin. The wages of sin is death – and sometimes death is gory.

The stories tell of sinful people who're no different than you and me rebelling against God and one another. They're selfish, spiteful, shameless, and sinister. And regardless of what they do – they're helpless, hopeless, and unable to save themselves. And because they're unable to save themselves, we see God in action in their lives as He reveals Himself to us as a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (cf: Psalm 86:15)

This morning, I'm going to talk about two different gory stories recorded in the Bible. If indeed:

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

... we need to understand why our loving and merciful God chose to include gory stories in the Bible, why they happened in the first place, and what they have to do with you and me and all mankind whom God so dearly loves and went to such lengths to save from sin and death and the devil.

The first story is in our first reading where St. Luke records Judas' death in graphic and gory detail. The second story isn't explicitly described in our three Scripture readings, but it's closely connected to the first story – and to every other gory story in the Bible.

As our text in the book of Acts begins, the eleven remaining disciples return from the Mount of Olives where they had just witnessed Jesus' Ascension back into heaven. They gather in Jerusalem just as Jesus told them where devote themselves to prayer as they wait to receive the Holy Spirit. (cf: Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8) As they wait, Peter addresses the larger group of fellow believers. They need to select a replacement for Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. When Judas saw that Jesus was condemned, he knew he had sinned by betraying innocent blood. He sought

forgiveness from the leaders at the temple—but did not find it. Hopeless, overcome by regret, and unable to save himself, he took his own life. (cf: Matthew 27:3–5)

Replacing Judas was important. God has one covenant people, built on the Old Testament twelve tribes of Israel and His New Testament people built on the twelve apostles, with the Messiah, Christ Jesus, as the chief cornerstone. The number of apostles had to be twelve to continue the apostolic ministry of being Jesus’ witnesses to the end of the earth. (cf: Acts 1:8)

As Luke records Peter’s speech to the brothers – he includes the gory and graphic details about the aftermath of Judas’s death which remind us that, according to Scripture, mankind has always faced horrible enemies, be they the devil, the world, or our own sinful flesh. The traitor Judas was the human enemy of Jesus, but the archenemy was the devil himself. It’s as if Judas were the puppet, and the devil was the puppeteer. (cf: Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27) The source all things gory in the Bible can be traced to the traitor Satan’s rebellion against God in heaven. He was numbered among the holy angels in heaven, but was rejected by God due to his rebellious sin. (2 Peter 2:4) He continued to rebel against God in his deadly deception of Adam and Eve in the Garden, and he continues to rebel today. Adam’s fall brought sin and death to all humanity as all mankind inherited his guilt and the desire to sin. As St. John writes in his first epistle:

“Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil...” (1 John 3:8)

Once sin entered the world, suffering and gory death soon followed, with Cain killing Abel due to jealousy and anger. As I said earlier, the Bible is filled with gory stories of death as God’s punishment for sin. Death cannot and must not be sanitized and smoothed over. It is the ultimate enemy and the last enemy to be destroyed on the Last Day. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28) So there’s good reason that Luke details the death of Judas, the betrayer of Christ, in such horrific and graphic terms.

Tragically, Judas not only suffered a horrible physical death, he also met the most horrific fate imaginable: eternal death and damnation in hell. Yes, the Bible teaches that there is a place called hell. Jesus repeatedly describes it as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth to depict the awful fate of those who reject the Son of God. (cf: Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28)

In our Gospel text this morning, Jesus refers to Judas as “***the son of destruction***” (John 17:12) which in the original language describes “***eternal destruction as punishment for the wicked.***” (BDAG, 127) This confirms that Judas has been eternally lost and condemned as a fulfillment of the Scriptures. For you and me and all mankind, it’s a sober warning against sin. The horrors of hell are a biblical reality, and they too, like death, must not be sanitized and smoothed over.

The story of Judas’s horrible death should snap us out of a false, fairy-tale view of life. It’s a necessary reminder that the devil continues to wreak havoc in our world, the church, and in our own lives today. One look at world history shows how great and powerful the devil’s kingdom is. (cf: Ap II 49) Sadly, history repeats itself over and over. On the other hand, however, we rejoice to see God at action in our text as He guides His newborn Church. But, as the rest of the Book of Acts, the New Testament letters, and life in the Church today illustrate, the devil is also still hard at work to undermine God’s life-giving mission and ministry through his Means of

Grace and among His people. No one knows this better than St. Peter, who denied Jesus three times. (cf: Matthew 26:74) Earlier, the devil deceived him into setting his mind on the things of man – not on the things of God. (cf: Matthew 16:23) That’s why in his first epistle letter Peter writes:

"⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

So now, let’s weave in the second gory story – which is not only gory, it’s glorious because it’s the gory story of Jesus crucifixion! Believe it or not, Judas’ death and the death of Christ Jesus have some things in common. But what they have in common illustrates completely how different these two deaths were in nature, in purpose, and in their consequences for you and all who believe. The death of Judas preaches the Law and should frighten and horrify you. The death of Jesus preaches the Gospel and gives you ultimate comfort, consolation, and salvation.

Both Jesus and Judas died on a tree. St. Matthew’s Gospel says that Judas hanged himself. (cf: Matthew 27:5) Our text tells the rest of the gory story that occurred sometime after his death. Jesus, on the other hand, was nailed to the tree of the cross. Judas died by his own hand on a tree that’s nothing more than a tree of death. It’s a symbol of hopelessness and guilt and despair. The tree that Jesus died on has become the tree of life for all who look to Christ Jesus for forgiveness, life, and salvation. He died at the hands of sinful men so that He could save sinful mankind, (cf: Luke 24:7) and forgive you of all your sins: your sins of being selfish, spiteful, shameless, and sinister. It’s a glorious tree for all who believe.

Both Jesus and Judas died gory, bloody deaths. In the case of Judas, our text provides graphic details of him falling headlong and bursting open on the ground. He betrayed innocent blood and when he tried to return the blood money paid to him for the betrayal to the temple leaders, but they sent him away. Because of his bursting open the blood money which was used to purchase the field where he died, the field was named “***Field of Blood.***” (cf: Matthew 27:5–8)

The gory death of Judas leaves us turning away in sadness, horror, and disgust. The blood of Jesus, on the other hand:

“... cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)

As it is written in Scripture:

“... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” (Hebrews 9:22)

Rather than turning our eyes away from Jesus’ bloody cross, we rejoice that in Baptism we:

“... have washed [our] robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”
(Revelation 7:14)

We rejoice to partake of His precious body and blood that is in, with, and under bread and wine for our life and salvation.

Both Jesus and Judas died horrible deaths in fulfillment of Scripture. We would do well not to probe the mysteries of God, but Peter clearly says:

“... the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas...” (Acts 1:16)

Some prophecies of Scripture are tragic in their fulfillment. At the same time, we believe and confess, with great joy and thanksgiving, that Jesus lived, suffered, was crucified, buried, rose again, and ascended into heaven for us **“according to the Scriptures.”** (Nicene Creed; cf 1 Corinthians 15:3–5) While the death of Judas is a gory story, the gory story of Jesus death is truly a glorious story for all who confess and:

“... preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” (1 Corinthians 1:23)

St. Paul writes that the crucifixion of the Lord of glory was:

“... decreed [by God] before the ages for our glory.” (1 Corinthians 2:7–8)

It’s the ultimate fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies, types and shadows regarding God’s plan of salvation.

Both Jesus and Judas were abandoned, forsaken, and deserted in death. Peter quotes the psalmist as prophecy about the death of Judas saying:

“May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it...” (Acts 1:20; cf: Psalm 69:25)

In the end, Judas was helpless, hopeless, and utterly alone – and tragically, like all those who die without true repentance and faith, he’ll face an eternity of separation from God.

Jesus was also abandoned in His death, by his disciples and forsaken by His own Father. (cf: Mark 15:34) Yet His being abandoned and forsaken is actually a source of infinite comfort for you and all who believe. Jesus was forsaken by His Father in your place, as your substitute and sin-bearer. Since He was forsaken for you, once and for all, you have God’s sure and certain promise that He’ll never leave you nor forsake you. (cf: Hebrews 13:5; Romans 8:31–39)

The gory death of Judas reminds us of the horrific enemies of humankind: the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh which all can lead to eternal death and damnation. But the gory and yet glorious death of Jesus assures us that devil has been defeated forever. Through His death and resurrection, He has won victory over sin, death, and the grave.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.