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## THE LENTEN MEDITATIONS 2023 – WEEK 5

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### *HOPELESSNESS AND JUDAS ISCARIOT*

BY TARA LUDWIG

As our Lenten journey brings us closer to Good Friday, we must wrestle with the ugliness of the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. How could someone who had the privilege of living and walking with the Messiah, a person Jesus himself called a Friend, do something so terrible? Scholars have suggested many possible explanations for Judas' betrayal: he was greedy and sold Jesus out for the 30 pieces of silver, he was angry with Jesus for not overthrowing Roman rule, or he was just plain evil. Some writers even theorize that Jesus *asked* Judas to turn him in, so that the scriptures would be fulfilled. But I wonder, without getting too tangled up in the doctrine of it all, if perhaps I could suggest another angle: what if Judas acted out of desperation because he was someone who had lost all hope?

It was obvious, that after three years of public ministry, Jesus had made a lot of powerful people angry; the Roman establishment saw him as a nuisance and disturber of the peace, and the Jewish religious authorities hated and feared him. Judas must have felt the pressure of all this opposition closing in around him, as I'm sure all the disciples did, and he panicked; the ministry, as it was, was inevitably doomed. And maybe Judas succumbed to despair; he lost all hope, lost faith that the message and work of Jesus' life was bigger than any man-made institution could control. So he acted as a person without hope does; desperate, afraid, and frantically searching for a way to save his own skin.

I'm not trying to excuse or justify what Judas did because the choice he made was a poor one. But I wonder how much of our readiness to condemn Judas is because, in truth, he makes us uncomfortable; perhaps we can see ourselves in him in a way that's a little too close to home.

Let's listen in, with an open mind and heart, to a conversation Jesus has with his disciples at the Last Supper in the Gospel of John:



*Jesus said, “I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: ‘He who shared my bread has turned against me.’ “I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am. Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.” After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.” His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.” Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night. (John 13:18-30)*

When we hear that line, “Satan entered into Judas” maybe we picture something very overdramatic and theatrical; a swirling red spirit or a dark cloud emanating from the piece of bread, this tangible demonic force surrounding and possessing Judas, making him into a monster. But I don’t think Judas suddenly became a heartless, vicious monster; I think darkness took hold of Judas in that moment by draining him of the last of his hope. Judas was scared, terrified; he had given up hope in his friends and in God; so he took the only way out he could think of. Hopelessness not only makes us sad, it makes us desperate, and dangerous.

We prefer to distance ourselves from Judas by casting him as the ultimate bad guy in the Christian story: “Judas the traitor, Judas the betrayer, Judas the devil.” Our society loves making people into villains; taking one thing a person has done and twisting it into the complete explanation of who they are, writing them off forever. Yes, Judas did a very selfish, cowardly thing when he betrayed his friend; but to ignore that he was also a human being, full of complexity and depth and feeling, is to turn him into a scapegoat. Because how often have *we* behaved like Judas; and in times when we can see no evidence of light, lost hope in God and instead turned to our own best ideas? We have all



strayed from the path of hope; and I think it's important that we confront this frailty in ourselves. Because if we refuse to recognize our own failings, we forget that God is willing to forgive them.

And I am certain that Jesus would have forgiven Judas. In Luke 23:34 a crucified Jesus says of his persecutors, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Why would we think this statement was meant only for the Roman soldiers, and wouldn't include Judas, the disciple and friend who he loved? To believe that Jesus couldn't, or wouldn't, have forgiven Judas is to not give him enough credit; it is a vision of Jesus that is far too small. The essence of Christian hope is that the love of God has always been much, much bigger than our sins.

So, my invitation to you, as I send you off into your life in this fifth week of Lent, is to reflect on times when you have experienced the temptation of hopelessness. Who or what have you given up hope in? Our government? The drug crisis? The war in Ukraine? Let us pray this week that we would be assured of God's capacity to change hearts; may we be filled with hope and certainty that nothing and nobody- not you, not me, not Vladimir Putin, not even Judas- is beyond God's power to transform.

I'll leave you today with these wise words from Thomas Merton:

*Speak words of hope.  
Be human in this most inhuman of ages.  
Guard the image of man  
for it is the image of God.*

May the hope of Christ fill you and enfold you in this fifth week of Lent. Amen.