Sermon: *John 13: 21-32*
Dean Denniston, Jr.

Have you ever been betrayed or thought you had been betrayed? How did you feel when you heard about or experienced the betrayal? Were you shocked? Angry? Confused-all of the above? Who was the betrayer-a friend, spouse, partner, family member, colleague, co-worker? Did you confront your betrayer? How did you handle it?

What would you do if you knew in advance that someone whom you trusted was going to betray you? Would you confront that person? What would you say? Would you take action to prevent the betrayal?

I am guessing that the most common feelings associated with betrayal are shock and surprise. You don’t expect to get undercut, undermined, blindsided or betrayed by someone whom you trust.

Jesus knew that he was going to be betrayed. Jesus also knew his betrayer. Why did he not do something to prevent this from happening? Why did he instead say to his betrayer, “Do quickly what you are going to do”. Why did not his disciples, once being informed by Jesus of such imminent betrayal press him to reveal his betrayer? Why did they not come to his aid? Did they not see him dip the bread into the wine and give it to Judas right after he had said “whom I give this to, will betray me”

And what about Judas? What must have been running through his mind about this anticipated act? Was his betrayal of Jesus done out of envy, malice, anger, pride? Did he think that he was better than Jesus and could pull this off without being caught or punished? Or, was his betrayal of Jesus part of a larger plan in which he plays a very significant role? Was his betrayal done to help fulfill the prophecy? Does he get a bad rap for what he did-does he get a bad rap for doing the right thing?

These questions come to mind when one reflects upon the events leading to Jesus’ final week here on earth in human form.

When you think about it, Jesus didn’t need Judas’ betrayal to ensure his arrest, trial, and pre-ordained conviction. Throughout the years of his ministry Jesus was pushing the envelope. He was challenging the Mosaic laws and traditions, questioning the authority of the Pharisees, healing on the Sabbath, preaching that the temple was for worship, not to be used as a market place, calling for allegiance to a power much higher than that of the Roman government, calling for a new kingdom-not an earthly kingdom but a heavenly kingdom, preaching a message of love, justice, understanding, forgiveness, service and compassion. He was piling up a whole list of reasons why the powers that be wanted him out of the way-and they were making plans for that to happen. They really didn’t need Judas, he just speeded up the process.

And yet, knowing that Judas’ betrayal was imminent, Jesus did nothing to stop him. Do you think that Jesus knew that his betrayal was part of a larger plan-God’s plan?

The Gospels tell us that prior to reaching Jerusalem, Jesus had already predicted his death—even predicting that it would take place in Jerusalem. And yet, he made no effort to bypass that city-
steadfastly moving towards Jerusalem. He entered the city triumphantly with crowds of people throwing down palms and branches before him.

Once having entered the city he was a very visible presence, meeting with the harasses and the other authorities, and bringing his message of the coming of the Kingdom to large crowds of people who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover feast.

Thinking about Jesus, his betrayal, his imminent death, and his decision not to change the course of events always brings me back to April 3, 1968 when on a rainy evening in Memphis Tennessee, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped into the pulpit and preached a sermon in which he publically acknowledged the probability of his own death as a consequence of his participation in the civil rights movement. On that evening, at a rally on behalf of the striking sanitation workers in Memphis, and an event in which he was not even scheduled to preach, Dr. King talked about going up to the mountaintop and looking over and seeing the promise land.

After preaching a stirring sermon in which he talked about the civil rights movement in general and the struggles of the Memphis sanitation workers in particular, Dr. King ended his sermon with the following words.

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn’t matter to me now because I have been to the mountaintop and I don’t mind. Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promise land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land! So, I am happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”!

On the following day, April 4, 1968 Dr. MLK, Jr. was shot and killed by a gunman as he stood on the balcony of his hotel.

Dr. King did not let the threat of death prevent him from carrying out God’s plan for him. Having heard the rumors of threats upon his life, he nevertheless was determined to lead the march on the following morning. He didn’t hide, he didn’t feign illness, he didn’t appoint a deputy to go in his place. No, … he followed God’s plan.

Jesus knew and accepted that his death was part of God’s plan. His death and resurrection would be the catalyst which enabled all of us to be born again into God’s kingdom.

Jesus’ death is our salvation. That is the powerful meaning of the resurrection. Jesus went to his death willingly so that we could be reborn in the Spirit; That we could arise from the depths of our own sins and receive God’s saving grace.

That is the lesson of Holy week.