

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 22:1-6; Psalm 139:13-16

Sermon Title: "Mold Me and Shape Me" (Formation)

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We don't hear many sermons about Judas Iscariot. Judas is not a favorite topic for pastors and parishioners alike. Hearing a message about him might be as fun as hearing a message about Adolph Hitler or the Unibomber.

This is what we know about him: He was one of the disciples Jesus chose to be a student and then a spreader of God's word. The name *Iscariot* is attached to Judas's name, either because he came from a small town in Judea known as Kerioth, or because he came from a group of assassins that rebelled vigorously against the Roman government. The word *Iscariot* describes the weapon these men would use to kill people: a dagger, used at close range and silent as the grave.

We really don't know if Judas himself had ever assassinated anybody. When we read about the man we always read this sentence: "and he betrayed Jesus." This is what he is mainly known for: he might not have used a dagger, but he sure did use his

initiative to put the Savior of the world on the block and cut him down. He is the traitor of all traitors, *the* turncoat against the Creator of the universe. In Dante's *Inferno*, the first part of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante portrays Satan locked in ice at the lowest level of Hell. He has three mouths that speak treachery, betrayal, the middle one being Judas Iscariot's mouth itself. He is condemned forever for his sin, according to Dante.

What else do we know about Judas? He is the treasurer of Jesus' group of disciples, the one who carries the money bag and doles out cash when it is needed. Judas shows his financial expertise, when a woman comes to visit Jesus and pours a very expensive perfume over his feet. In John's Gospel it is the treasurer who says, "Why wasn't this oil sold for 300 silver coins and the money given to the poor?"¹ In other words, Judas couldn't understand how such a thing could be wasted for one occasion. The money could have been used for the less fortunate, or it could have added more weight to Judas's small treasury. John's Gospel goes on to say that Judas would steal money from the treasury from time to time, so he is known as a thief as well as the worst of traitors.

Here we gain a bit of insight on the man Judas

¹ John 12:5.

Iscariot. He seems like a person who cares little about what others need or want. He doesn't care what the poor get, and even what the rich get. He cares about what he can get for himself. Judas is always looking out for Number One, and that isn't Jesus the Christ or God the Father. Judas steals money because he thinks having such things makes him more important? Being disciples of Jesus Christ isn't enough, when it should be enough? Any one of us would love to have been called by Jesus to follow him wherever, but Judas might not have been too keen about that. Maybe following Jesus wasn't enough, sadly. Maybe he wanted more: more money, more notoriety.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, when the disciples' names are listed, Judas Iscariot is always mentioned after Simon the Zealot's name. Simon doesn't have a last name, supposedly. He is just known as "the Zealot." And he is not a zealot for God, as in he is ready to save souls across the world. He is a zealot for the Jewish cause against Roman. He is for an independent government, one that doesn't have foreigners telling them what to do, one that doesn't have Gentiles infecting their Jewish customs and beliefs. Just like the Iscariot assassins' group, the Zealots are a group that fight against the Romans

every turn they get, sometimes with protests and sometimes with weapons. The Roman themselves see this group as terrorists, as we view Islamic extremists the same way.

Is it possible that Judas Iscariot sees Simon the Zealot as a fellow compatriot, fighting the same fight hand in hand? At some point in his life, did Judas grow tired of watching the Roman soldiers occupy another town with force, and push another old woman around for being in their way, and invade another home to set up as their own lodgings? Did Judas feel powerless to fight this great force until he joined a group of assassins that had dangerous ways of satisfying his anger? When Jesus called him to join his group, did he believe that something would eventually be done about these filthy, barbarous Romans?

So the time comes. Luke's Gospel tells us that it is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover. Judas is meeting with the chief priests and scribes. They discuss a way to arrest Jesus. Luke tells us that "Satan entered Judas" before this meeting took place. I went to two commentaries on this matter, and both of them said the same thing: there is no way Satan could have entered Judas, unless he opened the door. Judas was in the same company of disciples who saw

the Son of God move people's hearts with loving actions and words, and they were all moved by what they experienced except one: Judas. He remained the thief, the scoundrel, the traitor of God. For some reason he let Satan in, but why? How many times during his life did Judas let Satan in to shape his thoughts, to control his actions, to make him do and say things he might not have if Satan hadn't entered in? What brought Judas to such a moment as to betray the Son of God?

Something molded and shaped Judas Iscariot in the person who would do such a terrible thing against Jesus. It couldn't have happened while he was a disciple, because Christ never preached thievery or violence. Judas must have picked it up at some point before become one of Jesus' own.

We are all molded by things along the way. Those things, whether they are lessons we heard or events we experienced, shape our understanding and outlook on the world.

Medical experts believe that even before our births we can distinguish our parents' voices inside the womb. We can distinguish various sounds and music in vitro. While we were having Parker and Amanda, Tamara and I played classical music so that our children might hear it. I would talk to my wife's

“belly,” so that my kids could distinguish my voice. Who knows how they were affected by what we did – we would hope something good came from it.

We never break cleanly away from our parents, even as adults. We take on our parents’ mannerisms as we grow up: the way they laugh, the way they speak, how they walk and carry themselves and interact with others. We tend to reflect all the good qualities of our parents, and sadly their bad qualities as well. When we do something awful, something we regret, we might think of how our parents did those same exact things, and we become embarrassed about learning something from them we shouldn’t have learned. On the other hand, there are qualities we love to reflect, and we know exactly where they came from. We are thankful for learning such things and carrying them out today.

We cannot blame our parents for all the good and bad that have shaped us. Friends shape how we act before others. Things we read about on the Internet or hear from the news shape us. Things we learn in school shape our thinking. When we get to college, the wide range of different philosophies multiplies exponentially. Some of the basic beliefs we held onto as children and teenagers may be shattered to piece with one comment from a professor or a fellow student. We get into the work world, and everybody

has their own idea of how to deal with people and situations. They have their philosophies about life according to what has happened to them as children and young adults. We tend to absorb all this information, and all of it shapes our thinking, our outlook, and not all of it is what we need for life. Not all of it shapes us into the people we ought to be, or even who God wants us to be.

All sorts of ideas shape us every single day, and they may turn us into humble, kind people or into condescending, cruel people. We may not bother about anything that is told to us, or we might become hot-headed and nasty when something strikes us wrong. We may justify our actions, especially those deep, and what we would call honest, feelings that rile us up and make us want to do something drastic.

We never wonder where we learned to think or act in such a way. We never go back to the time with our parents or our friends or our classmates, when we picked up something – we invited it into our lives – and we let it shape us in negative ways, and possibly in destructive ways. Like Judas Iscariot, we pick all sorts of things up along the way, and some of those things could lead to our undoing.

Psalm 139 tells us that it was never meant to be that way. God formed our innermost parts. God

shaped us while we developed in the womb. God made us wonderfully and fearfully, which is another way of saying that God created each of us uniquely – there is not one other person just like us – and that we are special, marvelous creations of the considerate Creator. We are the image of God with all of God’s attributes to care for one another and all of creation.

There was a certain way God molded and shaped us, without a mark or blemish; but then sin arrived to the scene and messed everything up. Sin is a derangement, as John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church put it.² Sin is not a part of our natural make-up as God made us up, but sin comes in and turns everything on its head. We cannot possibly do any good without the help of God. Sin deranges, confuses, disrupts what God made us to be. With sin being a disruption, we cannot help but be a bit defenseless. We cannot help but be porous, so to speak, to that anything can get in and get a hold of us. We are open to any attack that sin throws at us, no matter how big or small the attack. At times, we bend to the attacks and let them overwhelms us. Then we find ourselves in a world of pain that we never wanted to get into in the first place. We say things we didn’t want to say. We do things we would never dream of doing.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, cf. II, 1, 10.

Sadly, Judas Iscariot discovered the chief priest's plot about Jesus too late. Sadly, he discovered what Satan's plot was, and he couldn't kick him out after letting him in. We hope we may never come to the end that Judas came to. He came to it because he had nothing else left. We, however, still have the option of turning back to God.

Whatever sin has done to us, it is never too late to ask God for forgiveness. Whatever sin we have carried out – those unpleasant things we do that make us feel worse about ourselves – it is never too late to handle them over to God. What we learned can be unlearned. Whatever is a part of our nature that shouldn't be there can also be removed.

There is always a chance to experience transformation from whatever has formed us to be today. There is always that chance to get closer to what God made us to be, without blemish, one with God without interruption, without separation. In the next couple of weeks we are going to talk about moving from formation (who or what we are today) to transformation (who God wants us to be). This path from formation to transformation can be a bumpy road, as we will see next week, but it is a road we must all take in order not become what Judas Iscariot became, in order to become new, refreshed, born again.