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and fell to the ground. John 18:6

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

JOHN 18:1–11 ¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ²Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” ⁵They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁸Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.” ⁹This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” ¹⁰Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. ¹¹Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

As Jesus' public ministry ended and as he began his final discourse at table with his disciples, Jesus had repeatedly announced, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23; 13:1; 17:1). In John's gospel, Jesus' whole life anticipates his passion as the "hour" of Jesus' glory, when he will be "lifted up" on the cross. As Jesus' ministry comes to its climactic conclusion, a close link emerges between the death of Jesus and the glorification of Jesus. The passion account is permeated with glory; suffering and evil have no real power over him. He freely chooses to lay down his life because of his certainty that he will take it up again.

When we last saw Judas, he had gone off into the darkness of night (13:30). In this darkness people stumble and get lost because they do not have the light (11:10; 12:35). Now the arresting party, led by Judas and consisting of Roman soldiers and temple police, represents "the world." They come with their own sources of light, provisional lanterns and torches, to find their way in the darkness, and they come with weapons for violence, because they do not accept the way, the truth, and the light (verse 3). The remaining drama of Christ's passion will be played out within this contrast of darkness and light.

In the garden Jesus takes the initiative at his arrest and goes forth to meet Judas and the group of soldiers and guards. The fateful kiss, so dramatically portrayed in the other gospels, is missing here. Instead, Jesus appears in full command and gives his free consent. He does not try to escape or hide his identity. "I am he" (verses 5, 6, 8) reads more literally, "I Am." The self-revelation is the divine name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Confronted with the divine presence of Jesus, they all "stepped back and fell to the ground" (verse 6), the regular reaction throughout Scripture of those who encounter divine revelation. The forces opposed to Jesus are powerless when confronted with the power of God.

Keeping the focus of the arresting party on himself, Jesus asks that his disciples be let go (verse 8). The writer recalls the words of Jesus' final prayer: "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me" (verse 9; 17:12). Jesus is portrayed as the good shepherd who voluntarily chooses death to save the life of his sheep (10:28). He does not even exclude Judas from those whom he wishes to be set free. The fact that even in this hostile context no exception is made indicates that this gospel makes no final judgment on the fate of the disciple Judas. Despite his betrayal, Jesus puts Judas under the protection of the Father whose remarkable love Jesus has revealed (17:11–12).

Peter draws his sword in a violent attempt to change the course of events (verse 10). Misunderstanding the significance of what lies ahead, both Judas and Peter seek to thwart the designs of God. They form a sharp contrast with Jesus, who insists that he is to drink the cup the Father has given him (verse 11). In this garden, where Jesus had met so often with his disciples to instruct them, they fail to understand the necessity of his hour of glory.

Reflection and discussion

- In what ways does Jesus show himself to be the Good Shepherd of his disciples during his arrest in the garden?

- During his arrest Jesus demonstrates initiative and courage in crisis. What does the response of Jesus teach me about facing my own life crises?

- The actions of Judas and Peter stand in contrast to Jesus' decision to drink the cup that the Father has given him. In what ways have I struggled to take up a task that others have refused?

Prayer

Light of the world, your way and your truth shine in our darkened world. Guide my path so that I don't stumble in the darkness. Keep me courageously united with you so that I may follow in the way of your cross.