Choosing the Traitor: A Paulin Devotional
Luke 6:12-16
October 29, 2026

In each of the Gospels, we have a slightly different accounting of how Jesus chose his twelve apostles - each told in a way to accentuate and focus on the themes that the gospel writer wants to emphasise. In Luke, they have already been following him, and after a night of prayer, he chooses his twelve from among his many disciples. This happens in Luke 6, after he's healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law after he's called Simon Peter, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and Levi (Matthew), the tax collector. Only in the Gospel of Luke does he call his followers *after* they've witnessed a miracle.

And then one of those nights, Jesus went out to a mountainside in Capernaum to pray, and spent the night praying to God. And when morning came, he called all his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, and designated them apostles (apostle means "sent out"): Simon (Peter, his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew (also known as Nathaniel), Matthew (also known as Levi), Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James (also known as Thaddeus), and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Luke again is unique in all the Gospels for placing the selection of the apostles after a full solitary night immersed prayer. And that's what holds my interest today. Jesus, praying all through the night to God the Father, seeking his guidance, and choosing the eleven….and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Judas Iscariot wasn't an afterthought. He wasn't a mistake. I don't know when Jesus knew what he knew about Judas - John's gospel insists that Jesus knew from the beginning which of them did not believe and would betray him. I don't know what limits his humanity had on his foreknowledge. But he made those decisions in prayer with God the Father, who DEFINITELY knew.

In a few days we will mark All Saints' Day. And for Protestants, we, the community of believers, serving God, are all saints. So…what about Judas?

He walked with Jesus. He was sent out. Presumably he performed miracles as the others did. He's accused of being a thief and taking money from the money box - but they trusted him to keep it at the time. Only in retrospect are the failings of Judas Iscariot apparent. None of apostles saw a problem until the Last Supper and the betrayer's kiss in the Garden.

Jesus prayed over his choice of apostles. What did that prayer look like? Did Jesus seek the strength to walk in love for three years with a brother he knew would betray him? Did Jesus wrestle with the choice? Did he wrestle with the choice of any of them? Peter denied him three times, let us recall. He was about to entangle his life intimately with twelve fallible, messy, human men. Every one of them let him down. One of them wouldn't be able to forgive himself for it, and wouldn't come to him to ask Jesus for forgiveness. One of them would surrender to

despair.

And I sit here and think about that. This beloved, prayed-over, prayed for, apostle, Judas. The apostle that Jesus chose. The apostle whose feet Jesus still washed, knowing what he knew. The apostle with whom he shared the bread and wine at the Last Supper. The apostle whose kiss Jesus accepted in the garden.

Luke understands Satan to enter into Judas Iscariot right before he goes to the Chief priest and strikes his deal. Matthew and Mark have him acting of his own volition. John shows a gradual progression of evil, a growing hardness of the heart. Only Luke has Satan entering Judas - in a bookend to Satan departing from Jesus in the wilderness, “until an opportune time.” Judas, evidently, becomes that opportune time.

We have to be careful, though, when we read about Satan entering Judas. We can’t look at that passage blithely with our 21st-Century eyes and understanding. Satan, for the first-century Jews, wasn’t a possessing demon - he was the Accuser. The Prosecutor. The divider of relationships. He was the one who argued persuasively, intelligently, deceitfully, to lure people out of relationship with God. Judas wasn’t possessed - not in the sense that others in the Gospels are described when possessed by demons; he wasn’t hijacked. His rational will wasn’t overcome. His trust in Jesus was. And so he surrendered Jesus to the authorities, willingly. Did the Accuser prey on Judas’s greed? Did he whisper that things were moving too slowly? Did he suggest that surely, surely, Jesus wouldn’t submit to arrest and sentencing, that it would force him into a powerplay to reveal the expected Messiah in all his power and glory? We can only guess. Whatever persuaded Judas, though, the end result is that he didn’t trust Jesus - either to do things right or, in the end, to forgive him for what he, Judas, had done in betraying him.

I think that’s a space we need to sit in with deliberate consideration today. Knowing that as saints in God’s service we, too, have been prayed over and chosen, we have to understand that there’s a razor-thin edge between Peter’s denial and Judas’s betrayal. Both men allowed their faltering trust to impact their relationship with Jesus. Both of them failed him.

When our hope and expectations are shattered by a God who refuses to move at our desired pace and in our desired ways, how we respond defines who we are - or really, it defines whose we are. When everything hinges on our trust in God, we need to get that right. And it can be a really, really hard path to walk. We will get it wrong. We will stumble. We will falter. But life as a saint isn’t a matter of always getting it right. It’s a matter of trusting that when we stumble, when we falter - and even when we break - we are still serving a God who knew it all along, who chose us and loves us always. Being a saint, as we Protestants understand it, isn’t about being perfect and saintly. It’s about remembering, over and over again - when we’re frustrated, tired, suffering, disillusioned, despairing - who it is that we ultimately trust, and from whom no Accuser can separate us.


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