

The Twelfth Man
Acts 1:12-26
May 21, 2023

The Word of the Lord from Acts 1:26: “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

The Lord works in twelves. That’s the number of His people. In the Old Testament, it’s the twelve tribes of Israel—descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. In the New Testament, it’s the twelve apostles; and the new Israel, the Church, will be descendants of the Word they preach. Now, the number twelve doesn’t prescribe anything for the Church in terms of practice: we don’t have to meet here in multiples of twelve in order to be pleasing to God or anything like that. But twelve has significance in Scripture: quite often when you hear it, it’s usually there to remind you that the Lord has His people—and the Lord is faithful to His people.

But, as our text begins, there are eleven apostles, not twelve. Judas is gone, and you’re treated to a rather graphic description of his end in our reading. There’s a reason for this, I think: the language is rich with comparisons between the Savior, just ascended into heaven; and Judas, His betrayer.

Peter points out in our text that there were prophecies of Judas in the Old Testament, just as there were prophecies of Jesus. According to the psalms, the camp of Judas would be desolate and uninhabited—but Jesus would gather the nations. The office of apostle that Judas held would go to another, but Jesus would reign forever.

Judas, Peter says, was numbered among the apostles—but his station profited nothing because of his unbelief. Jesus was numbered among the transgressors, says Isaiah—and His office there redeemed the world from sin.

There is similarity in death between Jesus and Judas: both were hanged on a tree, and Deuteronomy 21:23 declares that the one who is hanged on a tree is cursed. Jesus was nailed to the tree of the cross by His enemies and judged by God for the sins of the world—because He bore the curse of sin, He made the sacrifice for all. Judas hanged himself in utter despair—not a sacrifice for others, but an act of selfish loathing. Because he rejected the grace his Savior offered, he kept the curse of sin for himself.

There’s a striking difference to their bodies after death. Jesus was pierced in the side: blood and water flowed to declare salvation and life in His name. Judas’ side opened and his innards were on the outside—a testimony of the corruption sin brings.

Jesus was laid in a tomb: friends and followers still honored Him in death. There’s no sign that Judas was buried: instead, he fell headlong into a field, says our text. I can imagine the burial crew cutting him down and heaving him onto the dirt as the sun was near setting. Throughout Scripture, the one who is left unburied is the one who has no friends or family left to bury him. There is no one left willing to associate with him: it is a sign of utter forsakenness.

Laid in a borrowed tomb, Jesus was buried in the very creation He came to redeem. Ironically, Judas was cast onto the field purchased with the thirty pieces of silver he received for betraying Jesus.

Finally, remember that this text takes place just after Jesus has ascended into heaven, having gone to prepare a place for His people. When the disciples pray in our text, they note that Judas has gone to “his own place.” He is not with God. Whatever else hell is, the greatest curse of it is to be cut off from God, from His grace and life forever. This is a despair that you and I cannot possibly fathom in this lifetime, because this world is not God-forsaken.

So the lengthy description of Judas’ end preaches the Law to you: the one who rejects the Lord and His grace faces corruption and death, cut off from God. In contrast, the death of Jesus proclaims the Gospel to you, because it is Good News: He is crucified and raised to life so that you might be with God forever.

So as our text begins, Jesus is gone—ascended into heaven. Judas is...just gone. The twelve are down to eleven. They’re incomplete—and God is not one to leave things incomplete. Peter takes the lead and addresses the believers who are waiting as Jesus had instructed them. He proposes a replacement for Judas. It is to be a man who has followed Jesus since He was baptized by John—a follower from the start who wasn’t one of the twelve. At least two men among the 120 fit the description: Joseph—called Barsabbas but also known as Justus, and Matthias. The plan seems good to the believers, so they pray and cast lots. This doesn’t necessarily mean a blind draw, by the way. Sometimes in Scripture, it’s like a roll of the dice, as when soldiers cast lots for Jesus’ clothing. At other times, though, lots are cast as a voting system. At any rate, what we know is this: the believers cast lots, and Matthias is chosen as the replacement. The Lord has His twelve again.

What happens to Matthias after this? We don’t know. He disappears from Scripture. With other apostles, historical tradition usually sticks to one story about what happened to them; but with Matthias, there are several different traditions which disagree with one another. So this is the story of Matthias: he’s an unknown follower of Jesus from the beginning; he’s chosen as the twelfth apostle, and then we hear nothing more of him. So we don’t know Matthias. But that’s all right: we’ll meet him eventually in heaven. In the meantime, we know that the **Lord** knows Matthias; and for Matthias, that’s what matters.

Furthermore, we rejoice that the Lord has His twelve again: and again, from the Word that they preach, the new Israel—the Church—will be born. The Word will spread to all nations and endure throughout history; and as the Lord did not forget Matthias, He will not forget any of those who believe in Christ and Him crucified. The believers add up over time: in Revelation, they’re described as a multitude no one can number; and, nearly in the same breath, John gives them a number—144,000. It’s not a literal number, but a symbolic one. 144,000 equals $12 \times 12 \times 1000$: it stands for all the believers of the Old Testament (the first 12) and all the believers of the New Testament (the second 12), times 1000 because 1000 is a number that symbolizes “all.”

So what does all of this mean for you? You are numbered among the people of God. You are among the 144,000 that no one can number. The Lord brought you in by the waters of Holy Baptism and placed His name upon you: He marked you as His own and promised, “I will never leave you nor

forsake you.” He’s chosen you to be His. Of course, He also chose Judas to be His disciple, and Judas fell from the faith. That is why the Lord graciously visits you in His Word and by His Supper, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

So in the end, this story of Jesus, Judas, and Matthias is one of comfort for those who are near to despair, who are troubled that they are God-forsaken and left to destruction as Judas was. You are not. Christ has died for all of your sins. He is risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven to rule over all things for your good. He has called you as His own beloved child. He promises, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” He didn’t forget the unknown Matthias, and He will not forget you. The devil will do his best to make you think the Lord has forsaken you, but the Lord’s Word is sure. You are numbered among the 144,000, among the people of God—because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.