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Acts 1: 15 – 17, 21 – 26
1 John 5: 9 – 13

Ps. 1
John 17: 6 – 19

In his 2008 ‘rockumentary,’ *It Might Get Loud*, film director, Davis Guggenheim, tells the story of three famous rock guitarists. One of those portrayed is “The Edge” (real name is David Evans) of the Irish rock band, U2. There is a scene shot in Mount Temple Comprehensive High School in Dublin, Ireland, where Edge was a student.

The school is no longer used, so Edge’s voice echoes in the darkened hallways. He walks up to an empty bulletin board and notes how in 1976, a 14-year old Larry Mullen posted a flyer asking if anyone wanted to start a band. Six people responded. One quit immediately, a second left a few weeks later and a third was kind of pushed out about a year later. That left Larry Mullen on drums, Adam Clayton on bass, Edge on guitar and Paul Hewson (aka Bono) on vocals. The band was first named *Feedback*, then *The Hype*, and finally, *U2*.

Edge comments that the band was really, really bad when they began. That was (as of 2018) 170 million records and 22 Grammys ago. Edge looks at the bulletin board, pausing and pondering. “I could have been a banker,” he says. Such is the mystery of Edge’s personal destiny, director Guggenheim notes, adding that it is the same mystery that accompanies each of our lives. How can any of us really and completely explain how we have gotten to wherever we are in our lives at this moment?

In our first reading today, from the Book of Acts, we hear about two men whose destinies are about to be determined. It is just a few days after Jesus’ ascension into the heavens. Jesus has told his followers to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Keep in mind that none of the disciples has a clue what that means, nor do any of them have any idea how long they will need to wait. At this point in time, the gathered believers number about 120 people. The community is at a crossroads. They need to rethink their priorities, reorder their lives and reconstitute their community.

Peter, as is his wont, stands up and declares that they need to fill Judas’ place in “The Twelve,” those known specifically as ‘apostles.’ Twelve is an important number. In numerology, which was important to ancient Israel, the number twelve signifies completeness. It’s also, of course, how many tribes there were in ancient Israel. That’s why Jesus specifically chose twelve of his followers as the inner circle. And with Judas’ betrayal of Jesus and his subsequent death, one of these twelve places is vacant.

The designation of ‘apostle’ carries with it legal power. To be an apostle is to be an agent, or official representative, of someone, and to possess the same legal authority. So, if someone’s apostle, or agent, says something, or enters into an agreement, it carries the same weight, or is just as binding, as if the original person has said or done that. Therefore, this is a very important decision regarding who shall fill this slot. In becoming the thirteenth apostle, whoever is chosen will also need to contend with the legacy of the man he is replacing, Judas.

Imagine the mixed emotions of the apostles and other disciples regarding Judas. They had lived and worked and eaten beside him. He had been one of them. And then Judas, with the kiss of death, served as a guide for those who wanted to arrest and kill Jesus. But really, was that any different than Peter’s three denials of knowing Jesus? Or the turning tail of most of the disciples who were

absent from the trial and crucifixion? Judas Iscariot's very name has become a catch phrase for 'traitor;' his character has come to epitomize treachery and tragedy. So how did Judas get to this point in his life? What events brought him to his personal destiny of ignominy and infamy?

There are three references to Judas in Scripture that give us hints how Judas could have come to this disgraceful point. In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus is in the midst of his 'farewell discourse' at his last meal with his friends. And the particular part which we overhear is known as 'the high priestly prayer' where Jesus entrusts his friends to his heavenly Father's care. Jesus notes that while 'he was with them' [note the past tense even though he is still sitting at the table with them], he protected them in God's name. Jesus says that he guarded them, so that not one of them was lost except 'the one destined to be lost' so that Scripture might be fulfilled. Which sounds as if there is some force, outside of Judas' control, that has brought him to this point. As one writer says, 'as if some ominous fate overtook him.'

And in today's reading from Acts, Luke, the author of Acts, records Peter as agreeing that what happened to Judas was to fulfill Scripture. Although the reference to David is somewhat obscure, Luke affirms that Judas' actions were a divine necessity. In Luke's Gospel, he writes that satan (the adversary) entered Judas, which makes it sound as if Judas is an unwitting instrument of the divine hand.

Neither John's or Luke's passing explanation is terribly satisfying. It is similar to how the writers of Exodus try to explain the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Do John and Luke write to somehow present Judas as a mere pawn because they do not know how to account for Judas' actions otherwise? Matthew's treatment of Judas is the kindest, as he records Judas confessing his actions and then taking his life, a classic sign of remorse.

Was Judas just so terribly disappointed that Jesus was not going to turn out to be the messiah that he (and the rest of Israel) had envisioned – a knight in shining armor who would save Israel from Roman oppression with might? Was he just in it for the money?

About a dozen years ago, an ancient manuscript known as the Gospel of Judas was made public. It's in about a thousand fragments. The theology in it is late second century and the carbon-dating is from the mid-third century. In contrast to the four canonical Gospels, this text depicts Judas as following instructions which Jesus gives to him, and therefore as a necessary tool in the process of salvation. The text purports that Jesus had entrusted the true gospel only to Judas and not to the others. Perhaps it's not surprising that some of the Gnostics would want to makeover Judas' reputation and turn him into a hero. In this lifetime, we will probably never know exactly how Judas arrives at his destiny. Perhaps even Judas doesn't know how things get to that point until it is too late.

The Rev. Dan Clendinen notes that not only are Judas' actions substantially similar to Peter and most of the other apostles, Judas' response is to be "filled with remorse," while Peter breaks down and cries. Clendinen cautions that we should not underestimate our own capacity to betray and to deny. In a way, he says, Judas takes our place and triggers the event that changes all of human history and human destiny. It is, in some sense, an upward fall like that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is proof positive that out of bad, God can always bring good. It's worth noting that in the tradition of the Orthodox churches, when Jesus descends to the dead after he dies, the first person he greets is Judas with an embrace of forgiveness.

As for the other two, selected from among those men who had gone in and out with all the rest of the disciples from the time of Jesus' baptism until his ascension, Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias are notable only for their obscurity. Other than this reference to them, they are both relegated to the dustbins of history. However, selected by the casting of lots [a big fuzzy pair of dice?], Matthias' destiny is bound to be changed from this point, but we have no idea in what way.

Tradition doesn't help us much. There are later conjectures regarding Matthias actual identity. Perhaps he was Zaccheus. Or Barnabas. Or Nathaniel. The 5th c. *Synopsis of Dorotheus* records that Matthias proclaimed the gospel to the "barbarians and meat-eaters in the interior of Ethiopia." In the 14th c., Nicephorus writes that Matthias preached and then died in the Caucus region of Georgia. A third legend says that Matthias was stoned and then beheaded in Jerusalem. A fourth tradition has his bones being buried in Trier, Germany. The mystery of Matthias' personal destiny remains a mystery. Perhaps Matthias became a banker. I wonder if Matthias, looking back on his life, any more than Judas, could explain how he got to his personal destiny?

How can any of us really and completely explain how we have gotten to wherever we are in our lives at this moment? We, the members of the Body of Christ, are a holy people. Remember that we are not 'holy' because we are special. Rather, we are special because we are holy. Holy means to be set aside for a particular purpose. For God's purpose. For God who created us, for God for whom past and present and future are one, our individual destinies are already known. It is only in our lived experience of linear time that they mysteriously unfold step by step. "For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord through the prophet, Jeremiah. "Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then, when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you."

We are a people of hope whose lives, whose destinies, are wrapped up in the Mystery who is God. A God who has our back. A God who has plans for us. A God who lifts us up in prayer. A God who guards and protects us. A God who forgives our betrayals and denials. A God who loves us more than we can possibly imagine. A God whose kingdom *is* our ultimate destiny. +

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