

Sermon Text: John 13:21-30

It is good to be back in this pulpit today. It's been a long time since I've stood here. It's good to see many of you. I've already spoken to many of you this morning. The last two years I've been serving Harris and Ebenezer United Methodist Churches, and I'm back in full retirement now, and this, of course, is mine and Eleanor's home, and you'll be seeing a lot of us, I hope, in the next few years. So it is good to be back among you and to be with you this morning. When Reverend Dennis called and asked me if I would lead the service this morning, I very readily agreed, and became excited that he would trust me to do this.

I call your attention now to what I would like to speak to you about this morning. Jesus is coming to the close of His ministry. He is aware that some of the events, some of the things that are about to take place, that some of those things will be neither pretty nor will they be helpful to the disciples, to those who He is about to leave behind. He has gathered the disciples in the upper room, and He is about to celebrate with them the Passover meal. He knows His time is short, and He knows that in just a few hours, He's going to be walking toward the cross. Judas has been a close friend. He has also been the treasurer of the group. Judas is disturbed. Somehow in his mind, he has been able to formulate what is about to take place, and he's about to do something that is out of character with Judas. He's about to attempt to stop this event, and in his attempt to stop what is about to take place, he will betray Jesus. Jesus says to him, Judas, do quickly what you have to do. Now according to John, Judas received the bread. Now read it closely, those verses that I read to you a moment ago. Judas received the bread, but never drank the wine so after receiving the piece of bread, this is what John says, after receiving the piece of bread, Judas immediately went out. That's the last verse of that particular section of Scripture. I love the way John ends that verse with a short, terse sentence. “After receiving the bread, Judas immediately went out.” Then John says, “And it was night.” And it was night. I've often pondered that verse.

What did John mean? What did he mean by those words, “And it was night?” Did he just simply mean it was night out there, it was dark out there, that the moon was shining, and the stars were in the sky? Is that all he meant? I'm sure he meant that, but I am also sure that those words, “And it was night,” have a much deeper meaning.

You see, John's Gospel is a theological Gospel, and we who follow Jesus; we see the deeper meaning of those four words. You see, the cross waits. Jesus knows the cross is waiting. In just a few, short hours, His dead body will be taken down from the cross and placed inside an open tomb and a stone rolled in front of that tomb. Those who had instigated this event, standing far off as they watched what was taking place, seeing Him hang there on the cross and watching Him take His last breath, they must have smiled and said, “It's finally over.” It's finally done. It's finished, and now life can get back to normal in this little country of ours. Well, you know what happened next.

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Sunday came. Something, we who call ourselves Christian, something called Easter occurred, and the tomb opened, and our Lord came out, risen, alive and well! He would make 40 appearances, and eat and drink with His disciples. Well, the world has never gotten back to the normal before the cross and the resurrection. You see, my Jesus is alive and well. I hope your Jesus is alive and well. When He went back to the Father, my Jesus told us He was never going to leave us, He would send us a comforter, the Holy Spirit, and that Spirit will come, and come upon us, and will see us through, whatever may come our way. Sure there are going to be some tough times, but Jesus said, don't fret about them. I'm going to be here always even unto the end of the age.

All of us are aware that some tough times are going on out there in our world today. Jesus told us it would never be easy. He also told us to live each day as though it was going to be our last. He did not tell us when He was coming back. He promised, “I'll be there, and you go about doing my work, and live your life as though this is going to be the last day before I come.” Never, ever did He tell us when it would be. He said only the Father in Heaven knows this.

I've been reading the newspapers, and I've been listening to the news just as you. These past weeks, the doomsayers have been falling out the sky, telling us to get ready because He is coming. Well, I hope you don't get suckered. For the doomsayers don't know anymore when Jesus is coming back than you or me. Only God in Heaven knows that. What He wants us to do, whatever we do, is to live our lives for Him. Whatever happens, we who follow Him, we shall be empowered by Him. Sure it's dark out there. The fact of the matter is, it may get darker. And it was night.

Somewhere out there is that little cross. From that little cross, His light will keep coming; keep coming to you and to me. I believe this, and it's what holds me together. When I listen to the news, and read the news in the newspapers that more Americans died this week in Iraq, I weep for the fallen wherever they may be. You weep for the fallen. Perhaps someday, this old world of ours might learn that peace is the best way to go. I'm sure that you have wept for the people of Lebanon and Israel these past few days. We need to keep them in our prayers, and we need to pray that as the peacemakers come together that somehow the violence might stop.

When Reverend Dennis asked me to lead this service today in order that he and Caroline might take a little vacation time, I really pondered what I might say in the communion sermon. At first, I said in mind, stay away from the war. Then the question arose within me, “Why?” We who follow Jesus know this is a fallen world. We know this. Because it is a fallen world, we know that evil lives and thrives in this world of ours. We need to remind ourselves that we do indeed live in this fallen world. We also need to remind ourselves that we believe the time will come when Jesus will make it a better world.

Some of you who went through the first Christian Believers class we did some years ago, when you went through it with me, you know about my infatuation with the movie, it's an old movie now. It was simply titled, “The Gladiator.” The Gladiator movie has a very

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subliminal ending. You can watch that movie all the way through, and if you're not familiar with what's taking place and happening in the history of that time, you can miss the fact that the white gladiator and the black gladiator are Christian brothers. The movie closes with the black gladiator in the Roman arena. He's down on his knees. His brother, the white gladiator, has just been carried out of the arena, dead. Kneeling there in the arena, the black gladiator scoops out a hole in the ground with his hands, and in the hole he places carved images of his dead friend's wife and child. Then bowing as though he is in prayer, he says, "My friend you're with your family now. Someday I'll see you again." Here he's talking about the resurrection. "But not yet, not yet. I have to go home first." Then he rises and starts toward his homeland. As I sat there watching that movie, after I'd seen it about ten times, it dawned on me what was going on, and I discovered myself saying, that black gladiator, God alone put his life back together. Nothing else could have done it. Only God could have brought about the events that now point that black gladiator toward home.

I remind you this morning that all of us are on our way somewhere. My question is to you is where are you heading? It makes no difference. Whatever the events, whatever the challenges may be, the cross of our Lord Christ will lead each and every one of us home. Sure it's dark out there. Sure dark times seem to have engulfed our world. You and I believe there is one in charge, who will somehow, some day, take these events and piece them together, and we'll all be on our way home. Amen.