

## THE COBRA EFFECT

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
Good Friday + April 19, 2019

### *Personalities of the Passion: Judas Iscariot*

*Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with the police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. (John 18:2-3)*

Last month you may have heard the news story about a man in Abilene, Texas who made a shocking discovery under his house. He'd gone into the crawlspace to fix a cable line only to find a den of rattlesnakes living there. Fortunately he was able to back out unharmed and phone a company called Big Country Snake Removal. When the day was done the professionals had extracted forty-five rattlesnakes, the largest of which was 5 ½ feet long. Said one of the workers who did the removal, all the while recording it with a GO-Pro camera on his head: "This is nothing. We do this all the time."

Not every snake removal goes as smoothly as the operation in Abilene. Take, for example, the problem in Delhi, India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the city grew, so did encounters between a burgeoning population and the venomous cobras that thrive in the humid climate. Too many people were dying of snake bites. Therefore, British colonial rulers devised a plan that seemed foolproof: offer a reward for every dead cobra that ordinary citizens presented. What could possibly go wrong? Well, at first, nothing. The plan worked and the cobra population decreased. But soon the people realized they could profit by breeding huge numbers of cobras and collecting the reward. When the British learned of the scheme they withdrew the bounty. What did the snake breeders then do with all of their cobras, which were now worthless? They simply dumped them in parks and ponds and gutters, making the cobra population in Delhi worse than it had been before. Years later someone coined the term, "the Cobra Effect," to describe any well-meaning effort to solve a problem that actually makes the situation worse.

When I first read about the Cobra Effect, a particular Biblical figure immediately came to mind: Judas Iscariot. Judas is one of the personalities of the Passion we'll be considering today as we keep vigil at the cross of Jesus for these three hours. We begin with Judas not only because he's the first one mentioned in John's passion narrative, but because on Good Friday, this disciple is the one with most fingers pointing at him. Most of us have a basic idea of how Judas earned his infamous reputation: by betraying Jesus. For thirty pieces of silver Judas agreed to tip off the Jerusalem temple police as to where they could arrest Jesus quietly, without starting a riot. You see, the temple authorities feared that Jesus was a rabble rouser who would upset the uneasy truce they'd forged with their Roman occupiers. If Jerusalem fell into revolt, Rome would sweep in and remove everyone who had failed to keep the peace. So both the Roman and Jewish officials would be eager to manage Jesus, if not eliminate him altogether. They would need an informant, and they found their man in Judas. Judas saw his opportunity in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he knew Jesus would be going after the Passover meal. John reports that Judas led the temple police and a detachment of soldiers there, and the arrest occurred after only a minor skirmish. Judas betrayed Jesus. That much we know.

Unfortunately, we know precious little else about who Judas was. Apparently, Jesus saw something in him or else he wouldn't have chosen him to be a disciple. Some suggest that the name Iscariot refers to the town of Kerioth south of Jerusalem. If so, Judas *of Kerioth* would have been the only Judean amongst the other disciples, all of whom were Galileans. Galilee was rural

and agrarian, while Judea was more urban and business oriented. We read elsewhere that Judas was the treasurer of the disciples, so perhaps his background suited him for the role of keeping the money bag. Beyond these two clues – his name and his role – it's all speculation as to who he was.

Even more of a mystery than the “who” is the “why.” Why did Judas betray Jesus? The four Gospel writers, all of whom name Judas as the betrayer, found the deed so dastardly that it's clear they struggled to comprehend it. It boggled their minds how one of their own could do it. They reasoned that Judas was a greedy thief who loved money and all along was probably pilfering what little the disciples had. But could being a mere crook explain the treachery? No, they figured, love of money wasn't enough. Judas must have allowed Satan to enter his heart. He was an agent of the devil: a serpent, a snake. Even worse, he was the son of perdition whom God or fate had predestined from the beginning to play the evil role that he did. Beyond the Biblical record, the tradition grew to heap scorn upon scorn on the legacy of Judas. I read recently about a 15<sup>th</sup> century English custom called “Jack o'Lent.” On Ash Wednesday villagers would make a straw effigy of Judas, then proceed to stone it, drag it through town, and otherwise abuse it. They would keep it on display until Palm Sunday, when they would publicly burn it. See what love these Christians have for each other!

Was Judas merely a snake through and through, or might we come to another understanding of him? One clue to an alternate explanation of his deed lies in a different interpretation of the name. Some suggest that Iscariot, instead of referring to a town, derives from the Latin word “sicarius,” meaning short sword. So he was not Judas *of Kerioth*, he was Judas *Sicarius* – the one with the short sword. The theory goes that a sicarius, a short sword, would have been something that the Zealots kept concealed in their cloaks. Zealots were Jewish nationalists. They were extreme patriots who believed that Jerusalem was crawling with rattlesnakes – not only in the basement, but all over the house. The snakes infested the Temple, the halls of government, and the streets of commerce. Who were the snakes? They were the Roman occupiers, and the Zealots saw themselves as the Jerusalem Snake Removal Company, armed and ready for action.

The Zealots' single-minded aim was to see Jerusalem purified of Roman rule. Nothing else mattered, and they were willing – even eager – to achieve their goal through violence. They weren't alone in their feelings. Jerusalem was a revolution waiting to happen. People were on high alert for that one person who would blow the trumpet and lead them to an armed victory over the Roman occupation. Judas thought Jesus was the man. But why was Jesus taking so long? We can imagine Judas' frustration as Jesus spent time healing beggars and avoiding the very crowds he should have been whipping up. *Let's get on with the cause, Jesus!* We can imagine Judas' reaction to Palm Sunday, and Jesus clearing out the temple: *Finally! It's beginning!* But then at the Passover feast – the perfect time to rally the people – the only rallying cry was to love one another, and the only action was the washing of feet.

So Judas *Sicarius* – Judas with the short sword – left the Passover feast, sneaked into the night, and brought the police to the Garden of Gethsemane. What was his motivation? If indeed Judas were a Zealot, it might have been his plan to force a confrontation. His thinking might have been that if Jesus were to come face-to-face with the true snakes who oppressed his people, surely this one who could heal the sick and raise the dead would act. He would sound the alarm and the revolution would begin. Judas' heart must have leapt when he saw Peter strike out with the sword. *His plan was working!* But then to Judas' surprise and probably to his horror, Jesus restrained Peter and allowed himself to be arrested.

What was the result? The Cobra Effect. In trying to make the situation better according to his own distorted logic, Judas succeeded only in making it worse. Before we heap any more

scorn on Judas, we might recall how quickly he realized his error. Have you ever considered that the only disciple pleading Jesus' innocence at the trial was Judas? While the other disciples fled, while Peter denied even knowing Jesus, Matthew records that Judas rushed to the chief priests and tried to undo what he had done, even throwing down the pieces of silver. When Judas could not put a stop to what he started, he went and hanged himself.

The person of Judas is a tragic figure, and his legacy is a cautionary tale on two fronts. The first is a question he raises for all of us: *Is it Jesus whom you love and serve, or do you love and serve a cause?* Judas had a cause, even a holy cause: to remove the Roman snakes from the land of Israel. He had an agenda. It started out rooted in his religion, but eventually it became his religion. He was absolutely convinced that he knew the will and the way of God. Perhaps you and I too have our various causes that we are counting on Jesus to accomplish. It may be progressive or conservative, contemporary or traditional. It may be peace or patriotism, the environment or the economy, justice or mercy. Whatever our causes and agendas may be, Christ on the cross says to Judas and possibly to us, "Christian, love me more than these." "Christian, love me more than your cause." *Is it Jesus whom you love and serve, or do you love and serve a cause?*

The second cautionary tale of Judas is the end to which he came. When he saw Jesus condemned to death, he gave into despair and took his own life, unleashing the Cobra Effect yet again. One of the dubious distinctions of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco is the number of people who commit suicide by leaping from its heights into the waters below. Some time ago I read an article about a man named Ken who remarkably survived the 223-foot plunge. Faced with severe depression and what he thought were intractable problems, Ken concluded that everyone would be better off without him. He went to the bridge, counted to ten and froze. He counted to ten again and jumped. "I still see my hands coming off the railing," he said. "I instantly realized that everything in my life that I thought was unfixable was totally fixable – except for having just jumped."

Could Jesus have exorcised the demons from the basement of Judas' soul? Sometimes we compare and contrast Judas and Peter, both of whom in different ways failed Jesus in Jerusalem. Yes, Judas betrayed Jesus, but three times Peter publicly denied that he even knew Jesus. Luke records that when the cock crowed after the third denial, Jesus turned and looked at Peter. The moment devastated the disciple. He went out and wept bitterly. But somehow, Peter did not give in to despair. He held on, and in so doing experienced the surprising joy of the resurrection. Yes, I know I'm not supposed to be talking about Easter just yet, but bear with me. Mark notes that at the empty tomb of Jesus, the young man robed in white directed the women to tell the disciples *and Peter* that the Lord had risen. The inclusion of the words "and Peter" suggests that the risen Jesus especially wanted to reach out with plenteous redemption and forgiveness to the one who had failed him. The truly tragic thing is, had Judas held on, Jesus surely would have reached out to him too. Indeed, the young man at the tomb might have said to the women, *but go, tell his disciples and Peter, and go tell Judas too that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him.*

The forgiveness of sins, the redemption of the lost, and the removal of the snakes in our souls. It's by no means nothing, but Jesus does this all the time.