

Old Testament lesson – Exodus 12:1-14

New Testament lesson – Luke 22:1-6, 14, 39-48

An Opportunity

In chapter 4 of Luke's gospel account, there is a verse that is often overlooked, but I think it is very important. At the end of the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert, we find this statement: *And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.* Now, what do you suppose that means?

We find the answer in our NT lesson tonight: *Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve.*

It was the spring of the year, and the Passover was coming. This important holiday was, and is, celebrated in the month that is the first month of the Jewish religious year, called Nisan. There is also a new year celebrated in the fall. That one commemorates the month of the year when God created man. Passover, on the other hand, commemorates the liberation of God's chosen people from their bondage in Egypt.

Our OT lesson is a set of commandments for observing the first Passover. It is one of the most important, if not the most important, holiday for Jews. It has been so for many centuries. It was so in the days of Jesus.

Every Jewish male is supposed to go to Jerusalem to celebrate this important holy day. Not every one makes it every year, but at the end of a Seder, the traditional Passover meal, the people shout, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Even Jews in Jerusalem speak or sing this phrase as well. So it is more than a desire to go to a city; it is a desire to go to a city restored, with a Temple restored, with the reign of the LORD God of Israel in place.

As Jesus had pointed out earlier, however, Jerusalem was also the place to which a prophet would go to perish. Jesus came to Jerusalem knowing that he would die there. He had tried to express this to his disciples; it is doubtful that they understood until he actually died. And even then, they did not understand what was going on.

When they had the opportunity to listen to him, they had heard what they wanted to hear.

And it was here that Satan saw his opportunity. Jesus was walking into the hornets' nest of Pharisees and Sadducees and other leaders, many of whom wanted this noisy preacher to be silenced. It seems incredible that the religious leaders of the people wanted to kill this man who was setting so many people free from illness and evil spirits, who fed thousands miraculously, and even raised people from the dead.

But they did want him dead. They found their opportunity when Judas came to them and offered to betray him, for a price. They accepted the offer gladly. Judas began to look for an opportunity to carry out his betrayal when there was no crowd around, because the Jewish leaders were greatly afraid of the masses.

Judas apparently knew where Jesus would go after the meal, because according to John's account, Jesus often went there with his disciples. Again, Judas seized the opportunity placed before him.

But were Judas and the chief priests really seizing opportunities? Or were they simply following the path which God laid before them to carry out his plan? They were not so much seizing opportunities in some clever and cunning plot, as they were following bread crumbs like a bird in the park, heading for the box where God would pull out the stick.

As for Satan thinking this was an opportune time – he was falling into the greatest trap ever laid in the history of the world. I plan to say a bit more about that on Sunday. Even the devil did not know what was really going on, so his apparent opportunity to defeat God's plan would ultimately fail. But for a while, it would not appear so.

There is another opportunity laid out in our NT lesson, but that one was squandered. The disciples had an opportunity to support and

strengthen Jesus, but they missed it. He took them into the garden with him to pray. There were eleven of them; Judas had already left to fetch the authorities. Jesus told the others to pray so they would not enter into temptation. Perhaps they did for a while; then they fell asleep.

During this time, God sent an angel to strengthen Jesus. If the disciples had been praying as they should, perhaps that would have been enough to strengthen him. At the very least, when he returned to them after his prayer, he would not have been disappointed to find them sleeping. Instead, they missed their opportunity to provide one last bit of support in the hour of Jesus' greatest need, when he besought God to let this bitter cup pass by him.

It would be a terrible mistake to sit here 20 centuries after the fact and judge or criticize the disciples for falling asleep. How many opportunities to serve God do we squander? And even sometimes when we do take the opportunity and we do choose to serve God, it is an illusion. For sometimes, we are serving only the organization of the church, rather than the Kingdom of God. Sometimes they are the same, but not always.

And what about prayer? Do we really avail ourselves of opportunities to pray? I have preached about prayer several times over the past few months. I hope some of you accepted my challenge to pray just 5 more minutes each day during Lent. I accepted my own challenge, but I must confess that my success has been spotty, at best.

There are so many things that cause us to miss an opportunity to pray, or to cut it short. The disciples fell asleep; I have had that problem many, many times over the years, and I'll bet I'm not alone. Of course, the disciples had just had a large meal. But is that an excuse, that excuses them? Or is it just a reason that we ourselves might give if we feel too drowsy to pray?

If you spend much time trying to pray, you will find all sorts of things and thoughts that distract us from prayer. Annette and I have both

noticed that when we pray together, we often find ourselves yawning, whether we are tired or not. It's a distraction, but we try to forge ahead anyway. That's what we need to do with with distractions to prayer.

What are other things that can distract us? The telephone is a worse distraction now than it used to be, and 200 years ago it was not a distraction at all. Today, that phone can ring, or it can make all sorts of sounds to notify us that something of great importance has come to our phone. If you don't stop praying right now, you might miss a funny joke or a pet video.

Speaking of pets, they can distract you in many ways. So can a child, or a spouse, or a neighbor, or the Amazon truck.

Some distractions have been around much longer. People have always had other tasks to do when they took the opportunity to pray. Those tasks almost call out to us audibly when we are trying to pray. We may think something like, "I really should do that other task right now. I can pray later." But when later comes, there is another job that needs attention – right now.

Our own sinfulness can be a distraction. We may think our sinfulness is a barrier between us and God. In one sense it is, but it is a barrier that is easily removed *if we let God do the removal*. If we're going to avoid prayer because we have sin in our lives, we will never pray. Almost always, prayer should begin with confession. That's why I always have the prayer of confession near the beginning of the worship service. When I have been in worship services without an opportunity to confess my sinfulness, I have trouble feeling as if I have truly worshiped God. Yes, I could do my own confession, but the singing or announcements seem to interfere with that.

Perhaps, as you pray for someone, you will be distracted by thoughts of a need to speak with that person, or maybe with someone else. Maybe we need to forgive someone, or ask them for forgiveness, and that interferes with our prayer.

Sometimes thoughts about the past or the future interfere with our ability to focus on

prayer in the present. But the past is over and done with. If you need forgiveness for something, ask for it, accept it, and move on, If you are concerned about the future, trust God for it, and move on.

That reminds me of a prayer service I was at one time. It was in a church that believed quite strongly in prayer for healing and such. A man came forward and asked the pastor to pray for his hearing. The pastor laid his hands on the man's head, and then on his ears, praying for the man's hearing to be restored. It was a powerful prayer. He finished praying and put his hands on the man's shoulders, and looked him right in the eye. He asked him in a very quiet voice, "How is your hearing now?"

"I don't know," said the man. "The court date is next Tuesday."

We have opportunities to pray every day. We have opportunities to share the gospel on many occasions. We have opportunities to serve other people and live out the gospel for others to see.

But just as Jesus saw the opportunity to obey his Father and take away the sin of the world, the devil saw an opportunity to interfere with God's

plan. The devil will try to interfere with our opportunities to serve God.

It took a while for the disciples to recover from the missed opportunity in the garden on the Mount of Olives. But they did. Even after the resurrection, they were still missing opportunities, I think. But when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, they started to take advantage of many, many more of the opportunities the Lord gave them.

Did they still miss some? Probably. Will we miss some? Yes, we will. Will the devil distract us from God's opportunities? He will try, and sometimes he will succeed – for a while.

But let's move into the days and months and years ahead, determined to be attentive to the opportunities God gives us. Pray with focus and purpose. Share the gospel and love of Jesus Christ with others. Serve others in the name of Jesus.

Just around the corner, there is an opportunity from God, waiting for us – waiting for you, waiting for me. Seize it. Don't squander the opportunity like the disciples in the garden. Seize the opportunity, and serve the Lord. Amen.