

3 So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. 4 Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” 5 “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) 6 When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. 7 Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they said. 8 Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” 9 This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.”

Dear Friends,

In John’s gospel, there are times when Jesus intentionally kept his identity hidden, at least initially. Think, for instance, about his long conversation with the woman at Jacob’s well in John chapter 4. Jesus and the woman talked about many things, and Jesus (whether she realized it right away or not) was ministering to her soul. Finally, she said expectantly, **“I know that Messiah is coming.”** It wasn’t until that point that Jesus said, **“I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”** In other gospel accounts, you remember how many different times Jesus told either his disciples or the people he had healed not to tell anyone that he was the Christ—*“Hush, hush.”*

But here in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, there was none of that. **“Who is it you want?”** The mob replied, “Jesus of Nazareth.” The time had come. No more hints, no more *“Hush, hush.”* **“I am he.”** Three words loaded with truth. But what truth? The truth that Jesus of Nazareth is:

1. the almighty God. 2. the humble Servant. 3. the faithful Shepherd.

1. 1. *The almighty God*

Try to imagine what it must have been like to be Jesus on that dark night. The garden had been quiet except for the sounds of Jesus wrestling in prayer with his Father and giving voice to the anguish of his soul. But then, waking up his disciples (it had been quiet enough for them to sleep), Jesus went out to meet a band coming from the temple area and crossing the Brook Kidron. *Kidron*, strangely enough, means “dark.” The band was coming in the dark with torches and weapons—a mixture of Jewish temple guards and servants, along with Roman soldiers. They were there by order of the Sanhedrin—and

probably of Pilate himself—to arrest a man who had the potential to induce the crowds to riot. That could have happened, I suppose, if they had attempted this arrest during the day. “**But this is your hour,**” said Jesus, “**when darkness reigns**” (Lk 22:53). So they came under the cover of night, led by Judas.

Imagine being Jesus and looking into the faces of these men. John understates it in our text: “**Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, . . .**” but this wasn’t an educated guess or an obvious conclusion as Jesus looked around and saw the writing on the wall. Jesus *knew*. As true God, he *knew all*.

He knew all the men standing there, threatening him: disciples, temple guards, Romans. He could scan the faces of the crowd and tell you every man’s name. He knew all their parents and all their grandparents and all their great-grandparents. He could trace the lineage of every Jew there back to Abraham and of every Roman there back to Noah. He knew not only why they were there but how they got there—from Judea, from Egypt, from Greece, from Rome, from Spain, from wherever. Ultimately, the Son of God knew them all because he had created them all. And here they were—his handiwork—coming to arrest, abuse, mock, flog, and kill him. He knew all *that* was going to happen too.

With three little words—“**I am he**”—he knocked this large crowd--of maybe as many as 600 men--backward to the ground. No, it wasn’t them voluntarily “giving him some space.” This was Jesus’ almighty power on display. Never for a second was he not in control of what was going on.

1. 2. The humble Servant

Those in the crowd should have stopped and thought about this as they were getting back up, don’t you think? But they were all under orders, and Romans especially obeyed orders. The marvel of all this, though, is that Jesus the Son of God permitted himself to be taken by sinners. Even more, although he had the wisdom and power to make a thousand different plans for saving the world, in the mystery of his love, *this* was the plan, and all things would happen according to *his* plan.

I often think that it is this humble service of Jesus that amazes us so much. It’s so—foreign to us. We’re each born with a self-centered mind and heart; we naturally look to our own interests first. True, sometimes we need to do that. But many, many times we choose to do that for no other reason than it is best for us. Yet we know that it is exactly that kind of pride, that self-centered interest, which causes so many problems in our relationships with God and with one another.

Judas was with them. Here is selfishness and pride personified. We should take note. If we ever think we are pillars of strength who would never turn away from or give up our faith in Jesus, we need to look deep into Judas' eyes and see what sin is capable of doing. If we chase after it, it will seize control of our hearts and destroy us. **“So, if you think you are standing firm,”** St. Paul wrote, **“be careful that you don't fall”** (1Co10:12).

Each in the crowd also came for his own reasons. They also came with weapons because they were expecting some resistance; any self-respecting person worth his salt would resist and fight, wouldn't he? Undoubtedly, they were expecting Jesus to respond in a—human way. That's what they would have done: *“You're not takin' me without a fight!”* Even Peter thought that way too and pulled out his sword just after this encounter in our text. He had bragged to Jesus about his bravado and already had lost face that night by falling asleep while Jesus prayed. He needed some redemption, to make good on his words, to polish his tarnished image.

In contrast, Jesus stood there calmly: **“I am he.”** He was not going to have one of his disciples take the fall for him; he was not going to have one of his disciples impersonate him in the poor light and then himself slip away into the night, escaping the angry crowd, as he had done a couple of times in the past. **“I am he.”** Twice he said it. The crowd wasn't sure; they needed Judas to kiss him to be sure. But Jesus also wanted to make sure that they took him: the right guy.

This is why he came into the world. He came not **“to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”** (Mt 20:28). He came to humble himself and become obedient, even to death on a cross.

1. 3. *The faithful Shepherd*

Yet perhaps the most touching moment of all—and certainly the most comforting to us—is how Jesus in this tense, awful situation still showed his great, great love for people, especially *his* people. Earlier in John's gospel he had said, **“I am the good shepherd.”** In the darkness of Gethsemane, he was keeping watch over his flock by night.

“If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: **‘I have not lost one of those you gave me’**” (Jn 18:8,9). Imagine that! The man that the mob came to get is the one giving the orders!

More than that, he is watching out for his disciples—not just for their physical safety but their spiritual safety as well. Seeing him hang on the cross the next day would be a tremendous test of their faith in him. If they were to also witness all the humiliating, horrible beatings and mocking and

stripping and spitting and flogging and hating—that may well have been too much for them. He would spare them that and go alone, as the Scriptures foretold. Defiant sinners would strike him, the Shepherd, and the disciples would scatter. Even so, he would not lose any of those the Father had entrusted to his care. It was best for them to go now; this would be best for their souls.

There is even more love here. Even to the end, the faithful Shepherd was still going after that lost sheep Judas. He tenderly pleaded with Judas as Judas kissed him. But Judas stepped back into his crowd. So he knocked Judas backward too, with the others, to warn him of what he was doing and the danger his soul was in. But did Jesus lose him? No. Judas rejected HIM and ran away headlong into eternal death.

But you who repent of your sins and cling in faith to this Jesus, look at who is protecting you! It is he! He protects you with his almighty power. He laid down his life for the flock, for you. And no one is able to rip you out of either his hand or his Father's hand. You are his, and he will not lose you either.

We have this great hope not because of who we are—how strong we are, how committed we are, or even how strong a faith we believe ourselves to have. Without him, we are nothing and can do nothing. Rather, we have this great hope because of who he is. And who is he? **“I am he”** who is truly the almighty God, yet who came as a humble servant to redeem you; it is he who is with you always, shepherding you unto eternal life. Amen.