**John 11:49-53** March 8, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Mid-week Lent 2

*John 11:47 The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. 48If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”*

*49Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! 50You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” 51He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, 52and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. 53So from that day on they plotted to take his life.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“It Is Better that One Man Die”**

Accidents – we think of accidents as bad things. But sometimes good things happen by accident. Remember the Reese Peanut Butter Cup commercials? People were having accidents with chocolate bars and peanut butter all the time. Those were good accidents. Some of the best accidents of the last 200 years include Velcro, microwaves, penicillin, Teflon and the adhesive for sticky notes. Sometimes, good things happen accidentally.

But have you ever heard of an accidental sermon? How can you have an accidental sermon? And if it were accidental, would it be good? I mean, sermons are to endured, not enjoyed! In the mid-week sermons of Lent, we will look at five accidental sermons. But here is the neat part: not only are they accidental, they are accidental sermons *given by Jesus’ enemies*. How could that be?

Well, some of them said things in jest, that actually were true. They didn’t mean it to be true. They didn’t want it to be true. But it was!

Others gave accidental sermons because their words could be taken in more than one way. They may have meant it one way, but we can actually understand it in a different and good way.

But the most amazing of these is this evening’s accidental sermon. God ***“prophesied”*** through an unbeliever. Why would God do that?

You should know that this is not the only time this happened. In one of the more obscure parts of Old Testament history, a heathen sorcerer named Balaam tried to curse the Israelites, but whenever he opened his mouth, blessings came out—which was very frustrating to the king who had hired him (Numbers 22-24). And it happens here again in John 11—an unbeliever prophesies. Each time, it is a testimony that God controls even unbelievers. They will serve his purpose, even if they don’t want to.

Tonight’s accidental preacher is a man named Caiaphas. Caiaphas was the high priest of the Jewish faith. In the time of Moses, God had chosen one man, Aaron, and his family to be Israel’s priests. *One of them* was given the office of “high priest”. The high priesthood was hereditary and life-long. It followed that pattern for over a thousand years. Then about 150 years before Jesus, the high priesthood became a political appointment. And if you thought politics in America got dirty, you should have seen this. Payments for the high priesthood were not made under the table, but in plain sight. On more than one occasion over the years, brother murdered brother to get this post. In Jesus’ day, the Roman overlords appointed and removed high priests at will. Caiaphas was one of these appointments. In a testament to his political ability, he was the longest serving of any high priest under Roman rule. He lasted 18 years.

Just days before our reading, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Not just recently deceased, still lying on his deathbed Lazarus, but three days dead, lying in a tomb Lazarus. Dozens if not hundreds of people could testify to the fact. And so, when Jesus raised Lazarus, crowds put their faith in Jesus.

Jesus’ popularity was a problem, because, as I said, even though Caiaphas was a high priest, his primary concern was political power. If everyone was following Jesus, that meant that his and the council’s political stock was dropping. So the council met to discuss how to deal with Jesus.

Caiaphas, as a good leader, lets the council discuss the matter. But all he sees is a bunch of hand-wringing and worrying, so he bursts into the discussion, ***“You know nothing at all!”*** And here is where he gives his accidental sermon: ***“You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”***

His words were pure politics. He was playing on their fears. The reason they worried was because they could not imagine a Messiah in spiritual and religious terms. They could only imagine a Messiah tied to politics. And if the Messiah were a political savior, as they imagined, then he would certainly bring a military response from the Romans. These were the political thoughts behind Caiaphas’ accidental sermon, ***“It is better that one man die for the people.”***

This may seem like an unbelievable mis-reading of Jesus. But remember this: while Jesus’ opponents opposed him for political reasons, most of Jesus’ followers followed him for political reasons.

Let this be a warning to us. Whenever we have political expectations of Christ’s Church, or religious expectations of the State, we have begun the path that led to Caiaphas—to a useless faithless church focused on this world. The purpose of the State is to establish peace and order for its citizens by means of rules and punishment. The purpose of the Church is to give eternal life by means of the Gospel, and to promote godly living among its members by God’s word. The scope, the purpose, the tools of Church and State are completely different. And they need to remain separate. Let Christ’s church steer clear of politics.

Caiaphas thought of himself as the supreme politician. He thought of himself as the hidden hand moving the chess pieces. But, in fact, God was manipulating Caiaphas. ***“[Caiaphas] did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied.”***

It is fitting that Caiaphas’ sermon is the first “accidental sermon” in our series. This is the most basic and necessary thing of all to know about saving faith: substitution. ***“It is better that one man die for the people.”***

This is *the key point* of our entire faith. Not effort, not improvement, not balance. These are not answers, because we will always fall short on effort, improvement and balance. *Substitution* is the fundamental principle, someone in our place.

You heard it Sunday in the Garden of Eden. Remember God’s promise? Adam and Eve would not conquer the Tempter, but God said, *“I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head.”* Not Adam or Eve, but one in their place.

The entire Old Testament sacrificial system was a system of substitution. In addition to many other offerings, every single morning and evening, a lamb was sacrificed at the Israelite temple for centuries on end. It was a continual reminder that mankind needs a Substitute.

The prophets spoke it. You know the reading from Isaiah which perfectly pictures Good Friday: *“The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all… he was led like a lamb to the slaughter.”*

Jesus himself proclaimed it: *“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom”* (Mt 20:28); and *“This is the blood of my covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mt 26:28).

All of the epistles focus on substitution. Of the many, many Bible passages from Romans to Revelation I quote only one, *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the sins of the entire world.”*

Without that substitution, we have nothing. Without substitution, there is no way for anyone to be saved. This was the glorious accidental sermon that Caiaphas spoke, ***“It is better that one man die for the people.”*** It is better. It is better that Jesus appeared in this world to be the sacrifice for our sin.

For as John concluded, ***“As high priest that year [Caiaphas] prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation,and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.”*** Yes, Jesus is the Substitute for all the scattered children of God – whether in African villages or Asian cities or American towns – the scattered children of God are made one in this marvelous substitute, Jesus Christ. One who died for many. Amen.