

Matthew 26:31
Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2010

Matthew 26:31 (New International Version)

Jesus Predicts Peter's Denial

³¹Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

" 'I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'^[a]

**Matthew 26:31
The Sword of Lent**

Captain William Fetterman served at Fort Phil Kearney, one of the Army outposts on the Bozeman Trail in Montana at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains. Although well respected among his fellow soldiers he was rather hated by the local Indians. He despised the natives and often publically boasted that he could wipe out thousands of Indians with just 80 soldiers. Cheyenne and Sioux Chiefs Roman Nose and Red Cloud had taken to random ambushes with small bands of Indians on wood cutter details that were sent to collect wood for the fort. Fetterman was frustrated and fed up with the constant harassment by the Indians. On December 21, 1866 it seemed that it would be yet another typical ambush for the soldiers outside the fort. A couple Indians stood on a ridge to the north of the fort making taunting gestures within view of the fort's lookouts. Fetterman was outraged. He gathered a platoon of 79 cavalry to give chase. The couple Indians on the ridge was a decoy. Down the slope out of Fetterman's view were 2000 Cheyenne and Sioux braves. All 80 of them were massacred. Exactly the number Fetterman had once boasted he could use to wipe out the entire Sioux nation. His mistake? He separated himself from the protection of the fort and the rest of the Cavalry. Roman Nose and Red Cloud had divided and conquered. His last moment on earth was to trade pistol shots with his second-in-command so they wouldn't be taken alive.

Divide and conquer is Satan's tactic, too. Jesus was at the end of his three year ministry on earth. Around him, he had gathered disciples and apostles who would be commissioned to take over the public ministry of the gospel. That is exactly what Satan fears and fights against. He is the archenemy of the gospel. He desires the eternal death of all. He taunts and deceives. He seeks to draw believers away from the means of grace to weaken and kill. Divide and conquer was his tactic on Maundy Thursday night.

That brings us to the text for today recorded by Matthew. Jesus warned the disciples of the imminent danger they were in that night. He said to them in the upper room, ***"This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: " 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'*** Jesus quoted a prophecy from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. Some 500 years before it even happened, Zechariah foretold that even those closest to Jesus would desert him in his time of need. Here is the question: What SWORD was he talking about?

Was there a sword in Gethsemane that night? Yes. Jesus' enemies led by Judas had come armed with swords and clubs to arrest Jesus. But they never used their sword on Jesus. In fact, the only sword we hear of being used that night was Peter's. And that whole mess didn't work out so well. So what SWORD were Zechariah and Jesus talking about? It was the sword that Simeon spoke of to Mary when Jesus was an eight-day-old baby. Simeon spoke of the sword that would pierce Mary's soul. It was the sword that God would wield. It was the sword that would bring the heavenly Father's full, righteous wrath down upon Jesus. It was the sword of Jesus' passion.

This was a sword that Jesus needed to be struck with. And when it did strike, the sheep did scatter. The effects of that scattering of Jesus' followers echoed from Gethsemane to Emmaus, three days later. "How could these horrible things happen to our teacher? We thought he was the one who would redeem

Israel." Doubt and despair are the inevitable results of scattering from Jesus, the Shepherd. When we remove ourselves from Word and Sacrament OUR faith will flicker and die.

Jesus rose from the dead and gathered his sheep back to himself. To them he committed the gospel ministry. He still gathers his sheep - every day - with the preaching of the Word and through the Sacraments. He has gathered you and gives to you the absolute assurance that your sins are forgiven and eternity in Paradise is yours! Why? Because our Good Shepherd took the full strike of the sword for you and me. Amen.