

**“When God Looks Weak”**  
**John 18:1-12**  
**January 31, 2021**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

We come this morning to John 18:1-12, the arrest of Jesus.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

<sup>18:1</sup> When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. <sup>2</sup> Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples. <sup>3</sup> So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. <sup>4</sup> Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?” <sup>5</sup> They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. <sup>7</sup> So he asked them again, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.” <sup>9</sup> This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: “Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.” <sup>10</sup> Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) <sup>11</sup> So Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

<sup>12</sup> So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, like the psalmist, our soul clings to the dust,  
and we ask you to give us life according to your word!  
Teach us your ways,  
help us understand your precepts,  
make us to meditate on your works.  
When our souls melt for sorrow,  
strengthen us according to your word.  
Help us to cling to your testimonies,  
and enlarge our hearts,  
that we may run in your ways.  
In Jesus name. Amen  
[Based on Psalm 119:25-32]

## **INTRODUCTION**

In our text this morning, Jesus Christ is arrested.

Jesus Christ, whom John told us at the beginning of his Gospel is God himself – this Jesus is arrested. And he is arrested by mere mortals. A band of soldiers come, bind him, and lead him away.

John has made great claims about Jesus.

But here, Jesus looks weak.

Which means that, according to John, God looks weak.

In our text this morning, John calls us to wrestle with that.

And we will do that by considering five aspects of our text.

In our passage this morning we will consider the appearance, the reality, the revelation, the responses, and the reason.

The appearance, the reality, the revelation, the responses, and the reason for it all.

## **THE APPEARANCE**

We begin with the appearance – the appearance, that, as we have already mentioned, in this text, Jesus looks weak.

In many ways that must have been case.

Despite all the claims Judas had heard from Jesus about Jesus's power, Judas is able to betray him here, and the arrest is successful. To Judas, Jesus must have looked weak.

The same must have been true of the disciples. They had come to place their trust in Jesus and in his power, but now they see him bound and led away. To them, Jesus must have looked weak.

And the soldiers must have made the same assumption as they approached the garden. They were men who had seen power in battle. They had worked as instruments of Rome's power. And as they first approached Jesus in the garden, it seems doubtful that he struck them as anything by weak and powerless before them.

Jesus looked weak. And if Jesus is God in the flesh, as the Apostle John has claimed, then God looks weak. He is, after all, arrested, and bound, and led away. Any God whom mere mortals can bind and lead away, would appear to be weak ... wouldn't he?

And as unique as this moment in in redemptive history, as Jesus is arrested, the pattern itself – the appearance of the weakness of God, is actually not unique at all. In fact, we have all experienced it.

We and the people we love get sick. Sometimes very sick. Sometimes debilitatingly and terminally sick. God is the Maker of the body. He is the one who gives life. He is the Great Physician. But if that is so ... if God can give health ... then why is sickness and death everywhere? Why does it afflict those we love? Doesn't it appear as if God is weak?

Our God is a God of harmony, and peace, and beauty, and wholeness. But so much is broken in this world. Relationships are broken. Cultures are broken. The natural world is broken and marred. If God loves wholeness, then how could this be? Does it not appear as if God is weak?

Our God is a God who loves justice and righteousness. He hates injustice and oppression. And yet we each have experienced injustice in some ways. We each have been hurt or taken advantage of by others. And as we survey the world and consider its history, we see terrible injustices and acts of oppression everywhere. But if God loves justice and hates oppression, how could these things be? Doesn't it look as if God is weak?

Our God is a God, we are told in the Scriptures, who loves the Church. And yet, the Church struggles. The Church suffers from trouble without, as cultures opposed to it seem to chip away at it, drawing people out of it and into unbelief – as in our country we see the Church shrink.

And on top of that, those who remain in the Church are so flawed. Sometimes we are embarrassed by our fellow Christians. Other times we are devastated by leaders who fail to live up to their callings, giving in to arrogance, selfishness, or scandal.

If God loves the Church, but the Church is in this state, doesn't God look weak?

And then there is us. We all have those places in our lives where we want to be better. We have wounds we wish had been healed long ago. We have sins we wish had been overcome long ago. And our God says he wants his people to be healed. Our God says he wants his people to be holy. And yet we remain wounded and we remain sinful. We might ask ourselves: Why hasn't God done more already to change us? And if we are still like this, doesn't God appear weak?

The arrest of Jesus was a once-in-redemptive-history event. But the appearance of God's weakness that came with it was not so unusual. It is a pattern that appears every day, thousands of times over.

In many ways, both then and now, God appears weak.

That is the first thing we see.

## **THE REALITY**

But then the second thing we see is that while God *appears* weak here ... John has very intentionally made it clear that the reality is quite different.

John goes out of his way in this text to make it clear that Jesus was not taken against his will, but that he went willingly – and not only that he went willingly, but he was in control of the entire situation.

First, we read back in chapter thirteen that Jesus knew that Judas was going to betray him. Then, here in verse two, we read that Judas knew that Jesus frequented the garden they were in. But Jesus goes to that garden anyway. If you know you are going to be betrayed, you don't go exactly where your betrayer would expect to find you ... unless you want to be taken. [Carson, 577]

Second, we should notice that the soldiers brought torches on a full moon and a clear night, indicating that they expected Jesus to flee and to hide – in which case the additional light would be necessary. But Jesus doesn't do that. He doesn't resist, but he comes forward and speaks to them before they can even ask for him. [Morris, 742]

Third, John emphasizes in verse four that Jesus knew exactly what to expect, but even so, he not only stayed, but he offered himself to the soldiers.

Fourth, Jesus is so bold as to give orders to the soldiers not to arrest his disciples – and shockingly, the soldiers obey his orders. [Augustine, 112.4 (p.463); Wright, 104]

In many different ways, John is very clearly telling us that Jesus is in complete control of the situation. [Calvin, 190; Carson, 572, 577; Morris, 743]

And what John says of Jesus here is the same thing that the Christian Scriptures tell us about our own lives as well.

The Scriptures tell us that the God of the universe is, in fact, all-powerful. It tells us that he has made the world good, but that we have marred it through our rebellion against him. It tells us that even so, he remains in control, and he will make all things new. He could do it right now, for he is that powerful. He could put everything right at this moment – for he is that strong. He has his reasons for delaying, but the reason is not weakness. Just as John tells us was the case for Jesus here in our text, so we are assured of God's power today, despite appearances.

## **THE REVELATION**

So, our text tells us that though it appears that God is weak, in reality God is in control.

But how can we really know that? How can we have confidence that it is true?

And, for that matter, how could Judas, or the Jewish leaders, or the soldiers, or even Jesus's own followers, like Peter, really *know* that Jesus was in control at the moment of his arrest, and not just weak as he might have appeared?

Which brings us to the third aspect of our passage: the revelation.

For Jesus does not keep his power and his control of things a mystery. But he reveals it to all who are gathered in that garden that night.

And he does that in verses five and six.

In those verses, Jesus identifies himself as the one they are seeking. But in his words, he also does much more than that.

The answer Jesus gives, translated here as “I am he,” is actually two words in Greek: *ego eimi*, which can be simply translated as “I am.”

We have discussed this before in John’s Gospel, but that phrase was both a perfectly ordinary answer to give – a typical way of identifying yourself – and it also had the potential to carry a lot of theological meaning. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was used by many Jews in Jesus’s day, *ego eimi*, “I am”, is a phrase that Yahweh, the God of Israel, repeatedly used to identify himself. The simple phrase could carry one or both of those meanings. [Brown, 534-538; Carson, 471; Morris, 743]

So how is Jesus using the phrase here?

Well, the response he gets is a good indication. Jesus says “I am” – *ego eimi* – and the soldiers draw back and fall down on the ground before him. That’s what we read in verse six. That is the response that people have in the Old Testament when they are in the presence of God. [Wright, 103]

But it’s not only the content of Jesus’s words that serve as a revelation – since even that, we see, is open to some interpretation. It is also the power of his words.

Because what we see here is that Jesus’s words display a supernatural power – and it is this power that drives the soldiers to the ground.

Here’s what I mean: We could argue that if Jesus used the phrase “I Am” to identify himself as God to a group of Jews, their response – even a strong response – might be rooted simply in the meaning of the words, without any additional supernatural power being involved.

But the soldiers in this passage were not Jews.

The Greek of verse three actually makes it clear that these were Roman soldiers with Judas – probably soldiers who had been placed temporarily in Jerusalem for the festival, to strengthen the Roman presence and prevent mob violence or rebellion. Assisting with a possibly controversial arrest was just the kind of thing they’d be called in for – to discourage any sort of mob response. [Carson, 577]

Whatever passing knowledge these pagan men may have had with Judaism or Jewish belief, I think we can safely say that, as a group, they were not students of the Septuagint. And yet, when Jesus speaks, these soldiers fall to the ground before him – whether out of awe or terror. [Morris, 740, 743-744]

More than mere words are at work here.

John Calvin puts it like this – he says that Jesus “replies mildly that he is the person whom they seek, and yet, as if they had been struck down by a violent tempest, or rather by a thunderbolt, he lays them prostrate on the ground. There was no want of power in him, therefore, to restrain their hands, if he thought proper.” [Calvin, 191]

Jesus leaves everyone who is present without excuse. He not only identifies himself as the God of Israel with his words, but he displays his divinity, dropping the entire group of Roman soldiers to the ground, simply with the word of his power.

Jesus revealed to those in the garden that he was in control. Jesus revealed to those in the garden that he had power beyond what they could imagine. Jesus revealed to those in the garden that this armed group of soldiers was laughably weak before him. He made his power clear to them.

How does he make his power clear to us?

Well, in a number of ways.

As we look at the world around us, we see brokenness. We see sickness.

But in that same creation we see testimony after testimony that God is more powerful than any threat we might see in his world.

The intricacies of the world testify to the fact that this world we live in has a Maker – a Maker of intelligence far beyond what we can even imagine. And the size, and scope, and majesty of this world testify to the immense power of that Maker. Surely the One who sculpted the great mountains, surely the One who filled the vast seas, surely the One who formed galaxies and holds them in place – surely, he is able to control the challenges, the threats, the diseases of this world that we may face. Surely, they are no match for him. Surely, he is powerful enough.

Our longing for justice is a similar revelation. We know in our gut that things are not the way they are supposed to be. We long for justice to reign. But where does that longing come from? Where does that concept even come from?

As C.S. Lewis points out: “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water.” And we could go on.

Our desire for justice shows that true justice does exist. And it exists not as something of our own making or of our own aspirations, but it exists in the very One who wrote the concept of justice into our minds and placed the desire for justice into our hearts. And if he is powerful enough to do that, then surely, he is also powerful enough to write justice into every inch of this world he has made.

God has revealed his power in creation. He has revealed his power in the longing of our hearts. And he has also revealed his power in his care for the Church.

The Church, we have said, seems to be in retreat in our land. And it seems to be weak and often corrupt in its conduct. The weaknesses of the Church can feel so apparent to us. And that is not new. The Church has always been so – it is why the Apostle Paul said to some of the earliest believers: “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many of noble birth.” [1 Corinthians 1:26] Paul said the Apostles themselves were like the scum of the world. [1 Corinthians 4:14] The Church has often looked weak. It has often been disappointing.

And yet ... again and again the Church has conquered. The Church, beginning with a few Jews gathered in Jerusalem, conquered the Roman Empire. It conquered Europe. It came to the Americas. It is now conquering Africa and Asia. The Church, so weak in itself, continues to advance. Why? As the Apostle Paul says: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. [...] so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” [1 Corinthians 1: 27-31] The weakness of the Church, combined with its historic advance, is yet another revelation of the power of God.

And the same is true in our lives. For those of us who know the Lord, we may see the ways we fall short. But if we look clearly, we will also see the ways God has worked in us. We will see what we would have become without him. We will see the work he has done not only in us, but through us, though we ourselves are so weak. As the Apostle Paul put it, “we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” [ 2 Corinthians 4:7] And as Jesus told the Apostle Paul, Christ’s power is made perfect in our weakness. [2 Corinthians 12:9]

And beyond all this, the Word of God itself also reveals God’s power. His word to us, written and preached, is powerful – far beyond the power of mere human words. [Calvin, 192] It changes lives. It remakes cultures. It transforms worlds. And it testifies to the power of God.

God may appear weak to us at times. But he has not left himself without a witness. He has revealed to us his power again and again. He has made his sovereignty known to us.

## **THE RESPONSES**

That is the revelation of God. What then of our response?

In our text this morning we see two common negative responses. We see one in the soldiers, and the other in Peter.

### *Soldiers & Suppression as We Live Our Lives*

First, let’s consider the soldiers.

Their response ... or lack thereof ... is really something.

In verse six, Jesus, by the word of his power, lays the men on the ground. And how do they respond to this revelation? How do they respond to this manifestation of Jesus’s divinity?

They go about their business. They act as if it never happened. They proceed with their work and arrest him.

Calvin highlights just how delusional this response is.

He writes that even senseless animals, if they are knocked to the ground, will have some kind of response to whatever did it to them, but the soldiers, he writes, “after having had an open display

of the divine power of Christ, proceed as fearlessly as if they had not perceived in him even the shadow of a man; nay, Judas himself remains unmoved.”

This, Calvin says, should cause us to fear the potential hardness of heart we can have when we suppress the truth and become “more stupid,” he writes, “than brute beasts.”

Calvin speculates that the devil must have urged them on to return to their business without pausing to consider what had been revealed to them ... and then he marvels at the spiritual insanity it reflects. [Calvin, 192-193]

We might wonder at the spiritual dullness of the soldiers. We might ask ourselves how they could suppress the truth of Jesus’s power and its implications for their lives as they do here. We might act as if their response is hard to believe ... but is it? Don’t we do the same thing all the time?

We catch a glimpse of the majesty of God as we behold some aspect of the creation that reflects his power and beauty ... and then we go back to our small and selfish distractions and we forget about it.

We get a vision for the kind of justice that God has written into our hearts ... but then rather than committing ourselves to it, we brush injustice aside ... or rather than trusting God to vindicate us, we sinfully lash out at others in our own deeds of injustice.

We recognize in some way that God is at work through the Church, we see his power working in it ... but then we soon move on to disparaging the Church once more, and we find ourselves looking elsewhere for our hope.

We read the Scriptures, or we hear the Word preached, and we are struck in our heart about the truth we hear, and the eternal significance of it that applies to our lives and that calls us to repent ... and then, a few hours later we have mostly forgotten about it.

We can be all too like these soldiers. But the Scriptures call us to something different.

The Scriptures call us to behold the revelation of God. The Scriptures call us to remember the revelation of God. And then the Scriptures call us to respond in faith and obedience to the revelation of God.

And if we don’t, the consequences can be dire.

Jesus gives us just a glimpse here of his power towards those who suppress the truth and oppose him. With a word, he drops armed soldiers to the ground. This is when he comes in mercy. What then will his power look like when he comes again in judgment? What will it be like for those who don’t just struggle with a tendency to suppress his revelation, but embrace that tendency, and make it the dominant habit of their heart? [Calvin, 192]

The Bible urges us not to find out for ourselves. It urges us instead to face and to respond in faith to the revelation that the Lord has given us.

And so, we must identify how we tend to suppress the revelation of Christ in our lives, and we must repent. We must turn. We must engage with God's revelation to us. We must let it shape us. And we must let it shape our lives.

But the soldiers are not the only negative example we are given in our text. We are also given Peter.

### *Peter & Fear as We Consider Our Circumstances*

Peter responds to the situation, in verse ten, by drawing out his sword, striking the high priest's servant, Malchus, and cutting off his ear. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter. We learn in Luke's gospel that Jesus then heals Malchus, though John leaves that detail out.

Why would Peter do this?

Well, one thing we could say is that Peter wouldn't have done this if he really believed that Jesus was in control of the situation. Peter acted out of a lack of faith. And his lack of faith took the form of fear. And so he tries to sinfully seize control of the situation.

Fear, rather than faith, characterizes Peter. And not just fear of difficulty, but a much deeper fear: fear that God had lost control of things ... fear that God was weak.

Such fear, we should note, is wildly irrational for Peter. First of all, Peter also saw the power of Jesus's words drop the soldiers to the ground in verse six. But Peter had seen even more than that. Peter had seen countless miracles with his own eyes, confirming Jesus's power. Peter had spent hours sitting under Jesus's instruction, hearing how the power of God worked in the world. More than that, Peter had been told, multiple times, by Jesus, that this arrest was going to happen and that it was part of God's plan. And yet *still*, in the moment it came, Peter feared that God had lost control of things, and so he sinfully grasped at control himself, striking out in violence.

We might marvel at Peter's fearful unbelief ... but the moment we do, we should turn and look at ourselves.

For we, as Christians, have received testimony upon testimony of God's power. We too have been instructed in his ways – we have seen and been told how he works through weakness, brokenness, and even death to bring strength, wholeness, and new life to his people. We have heard, in his Word to us, that we, as his people, should expect trials and tribulations to come, and that it is by such trials that he is at work in our hearts and lives.

And yet, when those trials come – when sickness, or suffering, or uncertainty, or disappointment, or injustice come our way – we so often respond by fearing that God may have lost control of things ... and then we too begin to lash out and to grasp at control in sinful ways.

Six years ago, Marilynne Robinson wrote an essay for *The New York Review of Books* on the topic of fear. I don't agree with everything in her essay, but her fundamental point, the heart of the essay, seems unquestionable.

She shares it early on in the essay, writing: "My thesis [...] has two parts: first, contemporary America is full of fear. And second, fear is not a Christian habit of mind."

Robinson is a Christian, and fear among Christians in our culture today is her focus. And she focuses not only on how inappropriate such fear is for the faithful, but also how such fear tends to compound itself and grow.

She writes: “In the twenty-sixth chapter of Leviticus we find a description of the state the people of Israel will find themselves in if they depart from their loyalty to God: ‘The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight, and they shall flee as one flees from the sword, and they shall fall when none pursues. They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues.’”

Robinson goes on: “Those who forget God, the single assurance of our safety, however that word may be defined, can be recognized in the fact that they make irrational responses to irrational fears.”

Robinson notes that whereas Christians have seen such irrational fears as a spiritual problem in the past, today we tend to recast our fears as being a sign of our shrewdness, wisdom, and courage ... and to emphasize the point, we often cast those who are unafraid as the real problem.

In the past Christians were quite critical of inordinate fear. “But,” Robinson writes, “no one seems to have an unkind word to say about fear these days, un-Christian as it surely is.”

Where do you see the faithless fear of Peter in your own life?

We should note too that Peter’s fearful response is not only lacking in faith, but it is ironically counter-productive.

Jesus’s power was at work in the soldiers through his word to them. Peter, in his fearful and sinful grasp for control, cuts off the ear of one of the soldiers – the very means of hearing. Peter was not helping Jesus – he was working against him. How often, in our fear, do we do the same thing?

Our call instead is to trust our Lord. Our call is to *remember* the power of God revealed in the Scriptures, in creation, in history, in our past experiences. Our call is to remember, and to believe, and to have our fears eased by the knowledge that the Lord is powerful, and he is with us.

## **THE REASON**

We have considered the appearance, the reality, the revelation, and our responses.

Finally – what is the reason for all this?

*Why* does God allow himself to appear weak? *Why* does he humble himself as he does in our text? *Why* does he delay in setting things right, tolerating the ongoing existence of those things that are set against him?

And the answer that the Scriptures give, again and again, is: because he is merciful.

And at the heart of that answer in our text this morning, is the gospel itself.

Jesus did what he did, John says, so that he would lose none of those given to him. Jesus's physical protection of the disciples here points to his greater eternal protection of them – a protection achieved by his willingness to be weak for their sake. [Carson, 579]

For Jesus came to that garden that night, so that he might undo the effects of a deed done in another garden, centuries earlier.

In that garden, our first parents rebelled against God, bringing sin and death into the world.

In this garden, Jesus would obey God, bringing salvation and eternal life to the world.

Where Adam was guilty, Jesus was innocent. Where Adam hid, Jesus came forward. And where Adam was spared the penalty of death due to him for his rebellion, Jesus, who had done no wrong, accepted the death of the cross. He received what the first Adam deserved, so that those who had sinned in the pattern of Adam might find salvation in him. [Wright, 102]

As Augustine points out, while the soldiers were busy seeking Jesus, Jesus was busy seeking us. [Augustine, 112.3 (p.462-463)]

The apparent weakness of God in the garden was, in truth, a display of the mercy of God.

And the same is true today. The world is full of injustice, but God delays his judgment, not out of weakness, but out of mercy, that more may come to know him and be saved.

Our lives have suffering, but God delays his ultimate healing, not out of weakness, but because by such suffering he is making us more like him, working in our hearts, out of love, for our ultimate good.

John Calvin puts it like this – he writes that the Scriptures tell us that everything God gives to his children is for their good. It is all some form of medicine for their souls. Some medicine is sweet. Some medicine is bitter. But it is all medicine. It is all for our good.

Our cup may at times be bitter. But the cup given to Christ was far more bitter than any we will ever be handed. And while the cup we receive is always for our good, the cup handed to Christ was not for his good, but for ours – that we might be saved. And Christ willingly received it.

How then, could we doubt that he loves us? How can we doubt that he is good?

And this assurance of his love must shape how we respond when a bitter cup is given to us in our lives.

God does give us medicine that is sweet in this life – we all enjoy good things, which God has given us for our good.

But he will hand us bitter medicine at times as well. Some of us more than others.

When he does, we will be tempted to doubt his love for us. But it is then that we must remember the words of the Apostle Paul: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” [Romans 8:32]

How can we doubt that he is working for our good?

Of course we should seek relief from suffering in this life when it is possible – such relief may be the sweet medicine the Lord provides for us.

But when it is clear that Christ is handing us a bitter cup, we must trust him.

He died for us, and so how can we doubt his love for us?

He took on the cup of death that we deserve so that we might live, and so how can we doubt that he will work all things for our good?

He overcame death for us, and so how can we doubt his power on our behalf?

Let us not turn from him and suppress the truth as the soldiers do. Let us not lash out or run away in fear, as Peter does. Let us not fear our circumstances, but let us trust in our Lord.

For he loves us. And he will not lose even one of those who have placed their trust in him.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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