

The Seventh Sunday of Easter • May 28, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Acts 1:12-26; 1 Peter 4:12-19, 5:6-11

“Numbered”

Has Jesus set you up for a fall?

Take Matthias. Matthias, like Joseph Barsabbas, was one of the disciples who had been with Jesus from the start of his public ministry, beginning with Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. He had followed Jesus in his travels and his teaching for years, witnessing the mighty works that the Lord had done. Matthias was among the disciples, including the eleven remaining men that Jesus had chosen to be his apostles, when Jesus died on Good Friday and rose again three days later. He was present even for Jesus' ascension into heaven forty days after Easter, an event we celebrated only days ago. As firsthand witnesses of all these things, Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas were brought before the rest of the disciples as candidates to take up the role of apostle that Judas had forsaken.

Jesus selected Matthias to be the twelfth apostle. As we read, the disciples prayed for the Lord's guidance in choosing between the two men as to which would inherit this position, then they cast lots. When the lot falls on Matthias, it's not a matter of chance. Jesus picks Matthias, answering the prayer of his people and restoring the apostles' number to twelve. Reflecting the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles now serve as leaders for the new Israel, God's people in Christ Jesus.

Matthias probably couldn't anticipate what the future would bring for him as an apostle. He had seen great things happen as he followed Jesus, but what would come next? This passage from Acts is the last we hear of both Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas. That's not the end of Matthias' story, though. According to one ancient Greek ecclesiastical historian, the twelfth apostle's mission eventually took him to the eastern shores of the Black Sea, in the region of the country we know today as Georgia, where he was stoned or crucified to death and buried. After everything that happened, did Jesus set Matthias up for a fall by choosing him to be an apostle?

What about the Coptic Christians who were murdered in Egypt only days ago? They were on a pilgrimage to a monastery in the desert when a convoy of masked gunmen rained bullets upon their caravan, killing at least 29 and injuring dozens more. Their attackers didn't care that they were men, women, or children, as young as two or as old as sixty. Their intent was to kill Christians. Did Jesus set them up for a fall?

In our reading from 1 Peter, the apostle who called for Judas' vacant ministry to be filled after Jesus' ascension reminds us that suffering is the norm for people who follow Christ. It shouldn't surprise us. Why should the world treat us any better than it treated the Son of God?

Does persecution and suffering for the sake of Jesus' name surprise you? Maybe not in Egypt – but what if it happened closer to home? In our country, Christians have long experienced a favored status and haven't known the cross of persecution that our fellow believers do in other parts of the world. Speaking generally, Christians in America are only really starting to feel the loss of that favored status and the increase in alienation from society. Do you sense that being a Christian really costs you anything these days? Do you think that you need God's power working for you to be a disciple, or have you got it all under control? Do you need Jesus, if life as his follower will not be easy?

Has Jesus set you up for a fall?

Your faith as a Christian will cause the world to see you as an outsider, a threat, even an enemy. Yet that same faith calls you to follow Jesus in the world, living as his ambassador and sharing his love with the world. None of us can do that alone; as Christians, none of us will.

Psalm 68 speaks of the power and work of the LORD who provides for and encourages His people amidst the attacks of a hostile world. Matthias relied on this LORD's might to see him through life, even through death. So did those Coptic Christians who were killed for their faith. **By God's grace, you are counted among them.**

When the lot fell on Matthias, “he was numbered with the eleven apostles.” (Acts 1:26) He was counted among them, a full participant in the apostolic ministry, witnessing to Jesus' resurrection and ascension. When the waters of Holy Baptism fall, that person on whom they fall is numbered with all the saints of God. **In other words, Jesus counts you among his own.**

Jesus knew that life in the world would not be easy for his disciples, so he prayed for them. He prayed for you, too. Look back at our Gospel text from John 17. There, you'll see that Jesus asks that you and I be kept in God the Father's care – that we be numbered together. After this prayer, Jesus would go out with his disciples to the garden where he would be betrayed and arrested, cruelly beaten and mocked, and then put to death on the cross. He did it all because he loved you. Through the cross, Jesus' self-sacrificing love showed God's love to the world, the same as the Father's love for His Son. Numbered with Jesus' other disciples, including Peter and Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas, you and I are united as people who are blessed to have God's grace even when the world would reject us. Counted among Jesus' disciples, we are each ambassadors of his grace and his victory – for the world.

Numbered with Matthias, we get ready for what's ahead. Spoiler alert: Jesus wins. We're in the time in between. This past Thursday, we celebrated Jesus' ascension into heaven to take his place of power and authority over all things. As the angels told the disciples – including Matthias – Jesus will come again in glory to bring the ultimate victory that he has won for all his saints. In this time in between, Christians like you and I can look to Jesus as the fulfillment of Psalm 68, trusting in God's provision and encouragement amidst the attacks of a hostile world. We can even show love to our attackers.

When the lot fell on Matthias, Pentecost was still days away. Jesus' disciples were waiting for the promised Holy Spirit that the Lord would send to be with them. And then the Spirit arrived in power, sending the disciples, including Matthias, into the world. When you were numbered among the saints in Holy Baptism, the Spirit arrived in power. God has made you His own and will keep you in His grace, no matter what.

Hear again God's word of encouragement through Peter: "Therefore, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." (1 Pet. 4:19) "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you." (1 Peter. 5:10)

We need God's grace, especially since life as Jesus' disciple isn't easy. We need God's grace to pray for those who persecute the body of Christ. We need God's grace, because it is through His grace we are numbered together.

Has Jesus set you up for a fall? Just the opposite. He has taken hold of his people with his strong arm to lift them up, to deliver them and protect them until he comes again. **You are numbered among them.**

Amen.