

April 2, Passion Sunday A (Matthew 26:14-27:66)

The Passion reveals the many gods of my own making.

by [Brian Maas](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue

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If a god is truly that in which you place your trust, as Luther wrote, then the Passion narrative offers a veritable pantheon of gods, repositories of trust for the too fallible and too familiar humans who populate the Passion and show us far more of ourselves than we may be willing to see.

From the opening verses to the last, the familiar gods of this drama claim and then fail the trust that's placed in them. Meanwhile, in the very actions of these graspings for things in which to trust, there are repeated abandonments of the one in whom such trust could rightly and reliably be placed instead. Again and again these foolish exchanges reveal our own foibles, and in the process this drama draws us from being mere spectators into being participants.

Each year it strikes me how powerfully, pitilessly, and painfully the Passion does this to me, stepping into my life to draw me into participation, into recognition of my own life being portrayed in the action and inaction of others. This year I am especially aware of how the Passion reveals the many fallible entities in which I trust, the many gods of my own making that I worship.

The opening scene of Matthew's Passion begins with a jolting act of treachery as Judas approaches the chief priests to determine the monetary value of delivering Jesus into their hands. This is not merely a common transaction; it's an act of worship, a proclamation of trust in the god Mammon.

And what Judas proposes is much more than a mere betrayal. While *betray* is the word the NRSV uses, a better translation of the verb *paradidomi*, as New Testament scholar Rick Carlson frequently emphasizes, is "hand over." That verb appears frequently throughout Matthew's Passion text, and reading it as "hand over" reveals

the significant depth and meaning of each act. In one sense, betrayal is a matter of stepping back away from, whereas handing over involves a willful act of delivering to. Betrayal seems almost passive and incidental in comparison to the dynamic intentionality of handing over.

Again and again characters of the Passion willfully place their trust in gods of their own making by handing over the one who alone is worthy of their trust. Those of us in Western cultures cannot avoid the recognition of our daily reality in Judas's action. We would never sell out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, yet our commitment to live with integrity as his disciples is sold out again and again in our misplaced trust in the illusory security of wealth, possessions, *stuff*.

And it's not only Judas and material wealth. All of the disciples, in their "surely not I?" incredulity, and especially Peter in his "even though I must die with you, I will not deny you" brashness, demonstrate a confidence in self-reliance that shatters and scatters in the shadows of Gethsemane and the courtyard of the high priest. What a fallible (if all-American) god this is, the conviction that we are in control, in charge, can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

I write this in the wake of two simultaneous hospitalizations in our household of three. I have been the one spared, the one to try to fix things that are utterly beyond my control. I've been forced to recognize that for all of my decades of preaching faith in God, my own prayers are too often a version of "thanks for everything, Lord; I've got it from here." The experience of the failure of that self-trust has been desperate, its pain real. I've gained humility in shifting my trust from myself to God—and a deeper sense of understanding and compassion for Peter in his failure and denial.

Other gods claim their trust throughout the Passion: the god of violence in the garden of Gethsemane (and in the nightly news), the god of political power in the trial before Pilate (and in the theater of national and local politics), the god of rationalization in Pilate's surrender to the crowd (and in the countless trade-offs of our daily lives). Time and again, trust is placed in gods that fail and betray.

Ultimately, however, the Good News is revealed even in this endless series of disappointing deities. When Pilate commands the guards to make Jesus' tomb "as secure as you can," we know that that security is a sham, a god of no worth. No devices, no guards, no efforts, not even confidence in the finality of death can keep

that human security from failing.

And here is the Good News of the Passion. All our human-based gods will fail; our trust in them will be disappointed. At the end of the story, only one trust remains: the trust of the one who handed over himself—literally and sacramentally—for us. His trust is in the one who never fails, whose power endures and embraces even beyond the grave. In this God we trust.