

Mark D. Reichert
Lent Rotation 2021 – The Hands of the Passion
John 18:4-11 – Hands of Misguided Zeal

Check out what I found while I was wandering around Fleet Farm the other day... This is the Reaper Meridius Machete – 18 inches of cold, double-edged steel; a nylon reinforced handle; and a 1680D ballistic sheath! Now don't bother asking what that means because I have no idea, but I do know that it was written prominently on the packaging so that must mean that you are supposed to be impressed.

Well this actually is probably a lot like the short sword that Peter and the Roman soldiers had strapped to their thighs that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. They were probably a little shorter and made of some simpler materials back then, but even so, this was the go-to weapon for close combat in the days of the Roman Empire, and a well-kept sword and an owner who really knew how to use it was something most people in that society would have been *very* impressed with.

Except Jesus. When that crowd of temple police and soldiers showed up at the Garden of Gethsemane that night with torches and clubs and swords in their hands, they thought they were just tracking down some uppity rebel so they could snuff out whatever he and his followers had planned, just like they did to everyone else before him. But they were met by a commanding figure who was not about to be pushed around, even by the representatives of the most powerful fighting force this world had ever seen. He came before them with hands that looked empty, but yet held the whole world and its plan of salvation in the balance; yes truly, in Jesus' hands was the power to protect his people, as well as the Father's cup of suffering for sin that he alone could drink to earn our forgiveness.

But of course, Peter wasn't thinking about that. He wasn't thinking about the spiritual and eternal; he was too caught up in the political and temporal. Now let's first give the man his due – he was well-meaning, he loved his Lord, and he was willing to stick his neck out to prove it, at least at this moment. He was zealous, but his zeal was misguided, overconfident, unrealistic, even silly. In fact, to say that

Peter had hands of “misguided zeal” is really just a nice way of saying that he trusted himself and his own methods more than he trusted Jesus, right? And we can see that in the rest of the story.

Now there was just something about this whole approach that must've told those soldiers that this wasn't going to be a run-of-the-mill arrest. When they arrived at the garden, they didn't do the questioning; instead Jesus questioned them, “*Who is it you want?*” *Jesus of Nazareth*, they replied firmly. But then with a shockwave of authority, Jesus literally said, “I AM,” and not one of those big, tough, grizzled soldiers could stand before the power and name of the one true God. The same “I AM” God who revealed himself in the days of Moses and completely crippled Egypt, the world's most powerful nation at that time, was there and was more than capable of doing the same to Rome and whatever Jewish religious leaders stood against him if he so chose. But speaking of misguided zeal, apparently none of those soldiers had the good sense to think twice about trying to arrest this man who just put them on their backs with the power of his Word, so as they picked themselves up again, Jesus asked once more, “*Who is it you want?*” But I have to think that this time they answered maybe with just a little bit more pitch and trembling, “*Jesus of Nazareth...?*”

And at this point Jesus almost scolds them, “*I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.*” The Roman army wasn't used to taking orders from foreigners, especially ones accused of rebellion against Caesar. But yet here Jesus makes them admit twice that it was him they wanted, not the others; and so he would go with them, not the others. By Jesus' authority – amazingly – the soldiers let the rest of the disciples go and then Jesus let them take him without any real resistance. Jesus was protecting his people from physical harm and from spiritual harm; the Good Shepherd was willingly laying down his life to save his sheep.

But then all of the sudden, Peter came out swinging. Strike first, ask questions later is how Peter did things, and it cost the high priest's servant his ear. But Peter didn't get a chance to swing again before Jesus stopped him. “*Put your sword away*” – but why, Jesus? We have them on their heels! If we strike now, maybe we'll give ourselves a chance to win! But again, Peter's zeal was misguided, brash, even

silly. I mean, think about it. If he wanted to fight, then the unit of soldiers he would have to face there was a Roman cohort – maybe as many as 600+ trained soldiers versus a dozen untrained and ill-equipped civilians. That wouldn't have been much of a fight. And wasn't Peter in hot enough water already? Wasn't it bad enough that they probably would have already been considered accessories or co-conspirators to Jesus' rebellion, without adding attempted murder to the charges?

Peter's misguided zeal, his lack of understanding and faith seems so obvious and so silly to us here, but let's not kid ourselves. Sometimes we can make those same mistakes. Thinking I know best and I need to do something to help God, just like Peter, is a trap Christians fall into far too often. "If only we'd elect the right political leaders or pass the right legislation, then we could get back to the good old days when our country was a Christian nation." "If our church only had more family programs or more relevant preaching or talked less about sin or was more like that *other* church in town, then our congregation would grow." If we only did X, Y, or Z, then *we* could make things better. But again, just like Peter, that means we're thinking too much about what's in our hands and not enough about what's in Jesus'.

That night, it wasn't Peter's job to protect Jesus – Jesus was protecting him and the rest of the disciples. If Jesus' purpose was to fight, he had legions of angels to do it for him – but no, his purpose was to die, and so he sends his angels to serve us who will inherit salvation. "*Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?*" Jesus said. This was God's plan all along, that Jesus should pour out his blood for us and drink the cup of wrath and punishment God placed into his hands because of our sins, so that he could place into our hands the cup of forgiveness poured out for us in his Supper. Jesus wasn't about to run from this problem; no, he was running straight toward it, because there is no other path to Paradise than through Jesus' perfect, loving sacrifice for us. Yes, Jesus was fully determined to win our salvation not by force of arms, but by the power of the Gospel, because he was fighting for a kingdom not on earth, but in heaven.

And so friends, let's learn this Lenten lesson well. For the battles we face in this world, we don't take up a physical sword like Peter – we

take up a spiritual sword like Jesus. We don't use a Roman short sword or its modern equivalent – no matter how impressive they may seem – but rather we use the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. We are strongest when our hands are empty, but our hearts and lives and mouths are full of the message of Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose again for us. What our hands could never do in opening heaven forevermore, Jesus' hands did for us when he stretched them out on the cross to redeem us. So may God grant us the Christian zeal that's never too impressed with ourselves and never relies too much on our own strength or methods or understanding, but rather that's always guided by our Savior, with his Word, and to our heavenly home. Amen.