

## Third Sunday of Lent - Peter's Denial

March 4, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 17: 1-7; John 18: 1-27

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

Today we move into the last hours before Jesus' death. It may seem a strange place to be on the Third Sunday of Lent. Holy Week is still weeks away. But the gospel of John won't let us race through these final hours of Jesus' earthly life. John will have us dwell in those hours differently than the other gospel writers. John --- the writer, the teacher, the evangelist ---- wants us to see the Light that "shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:5) For John, one of the best ways to teach is to contrast, to show how the ways of God revealed in Jesus differ from the forces and powers that oppose them. Keep your eyes open for subtle parallels that make those differences clear. Keep your eyes open to the battle between light and darkness, love and violence, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, courage and fearful cowardice. With certainty, we will find ourselves in John's gospel but never take your eyes off Jesus.

In chapter 18, we begin in a garden. There was another garden way back in Genesis. One day, God came to spend time with the humans God loved, as was their habit. On that particular day, they hid from God in fear and shame because they had sinned. They had chosen to forsake God's ways for their own. All these years later, in another Garden, it is the other way around. Sin comes looking for Jesus — God made flesh. But Jesus does not hide. He asks them who they are looking for. "Jesus of Nazareth." "I AM he," Jesus says. Sounds simple until you recall, "I AM" (Yahweh) is the name God gave to Moses to use when asked by the people of God and Pharaoh. "Yahweh" "I AM" If you had missed it, John wants you to know that Jesus is the "I AM" — God with us. *Who are you looking for?* "I AM

he.” When he says it, the very power of God poured into Jesus — the I AM who is the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth and the life, the true vine --- causes the soldiers and leaders to step back and fall to the ground. He asks them again, “*Whom are you looking for?*” “Jesus of Nazareth.” “*I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go.*” The good shepherd is still protecting his sheep. John wants us to notice Jesus is not being taken. Jesus is giving himself over. It is not the soldiers, scheming religious figures, not dear Peter who cannot bear it all, not violence that is in control, it is Jesus. They arrest and bind him, though he offers no resistance or threat. Contrast the way of self-serving power and violence and the power of Jesus commitment to follow his holy calling. Which ultimately brings healing and which brings more sorrow and pain?

Keep your eyes on Jesus.

Next, we watch, what one commentator calls the “‘tale of two interrogations,’ with Peter’s threefold denial of Jesus told in two parts and Jesus standing like a beacon of truth in the center.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus is questioned in the high priest’s house; Peter in the outside courtyard. A high priest surrounded by temple police interrogates Jesus. A maid at the door questions Peter. In good dramatic fashion, the tension builds to see which will be the first to succumb to pressure. In no time at all, Peter caves. Jesus never does.

The scene shifts back to Jesus. He is asked about his teachings and his disciples. Jesus says he has spoken openly in the synagogue and Temple. They should ask those who heard him what it is he has said. Standing near his hour, “Jesus knows his time of teaching is over. If people are to know his words, they will need to hear them from those who heard them and know what Jesus said.”<sup>2</sup> Right

outside in the courtyard is Peter, one of those who has been with Jesus for years, “one on whom Jesus depends to share his teaching. Peter is warming himself at a fire with the very people who came to the garden to seize Jesus. Jesus — the I AM — is slapped inside for speaking truth about his unjust arrest and prosecution. Peter is saying --- “I am not”. At this point, the gospel reader is left to wonder if there will be anyone to passion Jesus’s story and teachings. “Aren’t you one of his disciples?”

When we pull our eyes away from Jesus, it is likely Judas and Peter who will grab our attention. They both were long-time disciples of Jesus. They both had their feet washed by him and heard him say, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Both would betray him. In Judas, we see the power of evil at work. John does not tell us why Judas turned him over to the authorities. Yet it is clearly something other than Jesus has captured his heart and will. Just like Adam and Eve, he has been lured by the lies of that which opposes God. Whether it is money, self-righteousness, his brand of politics or desire for recognition, Judas chooses it over God. He openly, deliberately chooses to give Jesus into the hands of unjust power. Judas’ betrayal... is the story of “human failure to resist the pull of evil, of human failure to embrace God’s gift of love and life.”

On the other hand, Peter’s betrayal is of a different variety. He doesn’t publicly claim or proclaim his love and commitment to Jesus. “Are you one of his disciples?... *I am not.*” Here is someone who has loved Jesus, been with him, known his love, looked in his eyes, eaten and laughed with him. Peter was moved to leave family and business to be his follower. He had pulled his sword to try to protect him. Yet now words and nerve fail him. To be fair, the danger Peter senses in that courtyard is real. John the Baptist had been arrested and beheaded. Jesus

has been arrested and seems to be headed toward the death he kept trying to warn his disciples about. All Peter's bravado and promises of faithfulness, fail him. "He chooses the temporary safety of a lie."<sup>3</sup>

"Peter's denials occupy that gray area [we face each day,] marked not by outright betrayal, but by compromise and acquiescence to personal expediency, self-protection, and fear."<sup>4</sup> You know, not saying you find certain language, jokes or attitudes offensive because it's a family member, friend or fellow employee. Excusing bad behavior because that's just their way. Overlooking those tiny wrongs that are in our favor. Nearly apologizing if someone asks if you're religious or go to church. Disconnecting our opinions, politics and money from Jesus' words and teaching. "Peter's denials clearly show how easy it is to lose heart, how easy it is to remove oneself from the embrace of Jesus' love.... [In our contemporary setting] the temptation to deny one's place with Jesus remains real and perhaps even more insidious. Under what social and personal pressure will one turn one's back on Jesus' love, will one [be evasive] about discipleship?"<sup>5</sup> Are we any better than Peter at standing up for Jesus?

Did you ever stop to wonder why Peter ever let his missteps and these denials become a part of the gospel story? Nothing like having all your dirty laundry hung out for everyone to see. Why did he agree that his mistakes and betrayal be part of the good news of Jesus Christ? Why? Because he knew the good news of Jesus Christ is not about him or us. If the betrayals of Judas and Peter were the story, we'd be lost. If this gospel was about us, we'd be doomed. But it isn't.

As I said in the beginning, keep your eyes on Jesus. While those who he loves are unfaithful, Jesus is not. Inside the chief priest's headquarters, in front of Pilate, on the cross, "Jesus remains faithful to the God he calls Father and to the

world he came to save. Jesus remains faithful to us even as we cave under pressure and deny Jesus and his teaching.”<sup>6</sup> He will give his life that we may know that it is God, not sin or death that has the power and the way to bring healing, forgiveness, peace and life to an aching people and world. “Peter will get another chance to say three times whose he is and to acknowledge that to belong to Jesus means to love”<sup>7</sup> and tend God’s sheep. “Emboldened by the power of the resurrection, Peter and all the Jesus’ disciples **will** proclaim Jesus and his teaching”<sup>8</sup> even at great risk to their safety. Jesus life, death and resurrection changed everything for those first disciples. What about us? Are we changed by knowing Jesus? On the other side of the resurrection, Peter and the other bumbling frightened, only partially understanding disciples become bold witnesses. “Are you one of his disciples?” What will you, what will I, what will we answer?

Linda M Alessandri 3/2/18

## ENDNOTES

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1. Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 18:12-27” for March 4, 2018 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).
  2. Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 18:12-27” for March 4, 2018 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).
  3. Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 18:12-27” for March 4, 2018 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).
  4. Gail O’Day, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX: The Gospel of John Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995 p. 810
  5. Gail O’Day, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX: The Gospel of John Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995 p. 811`
  6. Craig Satterlee, “Commentary on John 18: 12-27” for March 30, 2014 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).
  7. Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 18:12-27” for March 4, 2018 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).
  8. Craig Satterlee, “Commentary on John 18: 12-27” for March 30, 2014 as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).