

“Disciple Turns Denier”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 20, 2022

3rd Sunday of Lent

Psalm 17:1-7

Rev. John Wahl

John 18:12-27

During the season of Lent, we are reminded of human frailty and fallibility. Often we have the best intentions, and try our hardest, but still fall short. Why do we sometimes betray the people we love? Why do we run or walk or drift away from some friendships?

In our last look into John’s Gospel, in chapter 13, we saw Jesus rise from the dinner table and kneel down to wash the feet of his disciples; and heard Peter – boldly speaking up on their behalf – objecting that the master should take on the role of a servant, even vowing to sacrifice his own life for Jesus’ sake.

Though we’ve moved ahead five chapters, only a few hours of time have passed. After the lengthy teachings and prayers of his farewell discourse, Jesus rises from the table and leads the disciples to a garden, where they are met by Judas – flanked by soldiers and guards. Jesus steps forward and asks them who they are looking for. “Jesus the Nazarene,” they reply. When Jesus responds, saying “I am,” Judas recedes into the crowd.

Peter, again with boldness, attempts to defend his master from arrest by slicing off a soldier’s ear. Jesus tells him to put away his sword; he has already stepped forward voluntarily and knows what must happen, the cup that he will drink. So, the guards bind Jesus and lead him away.

Again – boldly, at risk to his own safety – Peter, along with another, unnamed disciple, chooses to follow. They come to the gate of the courtyard of the high priest. While the other disciple is known by the high priest, Peter is not. He needs permission to pass through the gate.

Gate and *courtyard* here are the same words for *door* and *sheepfold* used in chapter 10, where Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” Here is the place where Jesus will offer to lay down his life in order to take it up again. And here, Peter will be given ample opportunity to say that he is a follower of Jesus and proclaim who he knows Jesus to be.¹

¹ Meda Stamper from *WorkingPreacher.com*

This week's text is a tale of two interrogations, with Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus told in two parts, sandwiched around the bold testimony of Jesus in between.

When a woman standing guard at the courtyard gate – having seen that Peter had followed Jesus – first interrogates Peter, she phrases her question in a way that made it easy to say no; and he did just that. And as the guards gathered around the fire to keep warm, Peter joined in; when asked, for the second time, “Aren't you one of his disciples?” Again, it was easy to answer in the negative, “I'm not.”²

For a third time, Peter is questioned; this time, it's a relative of the man whose ear Peter had just sliced off. So, now, he is being accused is not simply being associated with Jesus, but of committing violence on his behalf. Peter denies having even been in the garden where that bold but futile act took place. And immediately after the third denial, the rooster crows.

But, of course, this reading is not only about Peter. At the center is Jesus, who knows that his time of teaching is over. Going forward, if people want to know the words of Jesus, they need to ask those who heard those words said and are willing to give testimony. Everything Jesus has taught now rests in the hands of his disciples; in Peter's hands and ours. Peter denies being a follower; but will remain a disciple. He will lay down his life only to take it up again. Even Peter will be granted forgiveness for the gaps in his faith and the grace of another chance.³

Unlike Peter, Jesus denies nothing. He affirms that everything he has said and done has been open and public. “Why ask me?” he says. Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said. The irony of this statement, with Peter standing in the same courtyard, maybe only a few feet away, stings a little. Perhaps his testimony wouldn't have been accepted, should he had leapt to Jesus' defense; and perhaps his recent outburst of violence with the sword in the garden would be used as evidence that Jesus was, in fact, calling for an armed uprising. But Peter had a chance to speak up, to offer his account of Jesus' teaching and his eyewitness testimony to all the signs Jesus had performed. Peter could have claimed his relationship and connection to Jesus, and he chose not to.

Why didn't Peter answer those who questioned him with a full-throated confession of faith? Why didn't he claim his membership in the fellowship of disciples, as a friend of Jesus? Was it cowardice or confusion? A failure of nerve or a strategy of self-preservation?

² *Worship-Well* Preaching Resources

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

Maybe it was ego. Perhaps Peter was biding his time and waiting to get hauled before some real authority— someone more important than the woman at the door and this bunch of guards pressing him. It had taken a whole cohort of soldiers (as many as 600) to bring in Jesus. Should Peter settle for less?

Or perhaps Peter was actually questioning his faith. Had the moment he and the disciples had been waiting for come and gone? In the garden, Jesus just allowed himself to go without a fight. A coward wouldn't have drawn swords against trained soldiers. Maybe, in this moment, Peter is telling the truth when he says he is not one of Jesus' disciples; or, at least, he's no longer sure and needs to wait to see what's about to happen.

Was Peter really in danger? Was he afraid? Did he need to lie? When Peter chose to stand with the Roman police and soldiers around the fire, it mirrored Judas standing with them in the garden – both of them deniers, choosing not to stand with Jesus. Peter had been willing to make the grand claim (that he would die for Jesus) and the bold gesture (cutting off the ear), but when he is confronted, he shrinks away, choosing the creature comfort of the fire's warmth rather than standing up for Jesus.

Sometimes we are also willing to make the bold statements or grand gestures, but fail to live out our values in small, everyday choices. We, too, face questions that are often framed in the negative, that dare us to differ. "You don't think racism exists today, do you? That's just the way things were back then." Or, "You don't believe all that COVID nonsense, do you?" Or, "You don't really believe God would create someone transgender, do you?" Or, "You don't think those people need handouts, do you? Can't they just get a job like you and me?"

What we learn from these contrasting interrogations of Peter and Jesus is that we are neither supposed to overreact with violence, nor shy away in fear. Both are discipleship failures, ways of not following, attempts to be in control of the situation, ourselves. Peter holds up a mirror for us; we don't know what we would have done in such a situation as his. Would we have been brave or shrink from the moment? Would we boldly buck the imbedded systems of power, popularity and privilege or take the easy way out?

For whatever reason, on that night, in that courtyard, as his master and teacher and friend was being badgered with questions and battered with slaps to the face, Peter was not ready to make an account of who he was and what he believed about Jesus. He stops following – turning away from his friend and Lord – and, as

he does, he disappears from the narrative. From this point through Easter morning, he'll be scattered with so many of the others, just like sheep who are without a shepherd. Peter will be found on another shore and be afforded his redemption story beside another charcoal fire in chapter 21 – acknowledging three times whose he is and that to belong to Jesus means to love – but it doesn't come here, not yet.

Instead, we will hear and see – in the weeks to come – the rest of Jesus' trial, which ultimately leads to his death. This is the cup that he must drink; he does not shy away from it, and nothing in the power structures of the day will prevent it. It is heart-wrenching for us to realize that our human tendencies of overreacting with violence and shrinking away out of fear cause us to fail or fall short; and that these are the reasons Jesus endured such pain and agony.

Lent is the time to be honest about where we stand. Do we rely too heavily on threats or systems of violence? Are we sometimes hesitant to step forward because we are afraid? Have we denied the people we love, failing to support them or even admit we know them? Have we been hurt by others, causing our faith in them and all else to falter?

While we may not always know ourselves, or the reason why we act or fail to act in these ways, God knows us. God knows that even if our intentions are good, we humans are not always reliable, that we tend to wander and veer off track. Thus, God has ways to help us turn around and return us to the fold. With Peter, we see that even the boldest among us can sometimes fall short; but that even when the denials are multiple and the hurt most egregious, forgiveness follows and grace abounds. Amen.