

“Jesus’ Arrest and Peter’s Denials”  
John 18:1-26  
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April 10, 2022  
First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine  
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If you look at the front of the bulletin today, you will see a picture of some palms and a cross, both sure signs that today indeed is Palm Sunday. But if you look a little closer you may see that under the picture is a line that says today is Palm/Passion Sunday. What exactly does that mean? Though this is the Sunday we remember Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, with the crowds waving palm branches and greeting him with shouts of “Hosanna” it is also the day that begins the events leading to Jesus’ passion - the events leading to his arrest, his trial and then his crucifixion on Friday. Passion refers to Jesus’ suffering, and while many sermons focus on the palm parade, this morning we are going to focus on Jesus’ arrest and Peter’s denial of Jesus. I think it’s important to remember that Jesus’ suffering did not just involve the physical pain of death on the cross, but it also involved the pain of his closest followers turning their backs on him.

Last Sunday we took a look at the passage from John 13, the story of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. Jesus did this act of humble service to teach his followers about the importance of love, instructing them to follow his example with one another. Beginning with chapter 14 and going all the way through chapter 17, Jesus takes time to pour out his heart to his followers, preparing them for his approaching death by giving them words of compassion from his heart. He even prays for them, asking his Father to watch over them as the hour of his passion is about to begin. Then the action picks up again, beginning with verse 1 of chapter 18. Let us listen now for God’s Word:

After he said these things, Jesus went out with his disciples and crossed over to the other side of the Kidron Valley. He and his disciples entered a garden there. Judas, his betrayer, also knew the place because Jesus often gathered there with his disciples. Judas brought a company of soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They came there carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus knew everything that was to happen to him, so he went out and asked, “Who are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus the Nazarene.” He said to them, “I Am.” (Judas, his betrayer, was standing with them.) When he said, “I Am,” they shrank back and fell to the ground.

He asked them again, “Who are you looking for?” They said, “Jesus the Nazarene.” Jesus answered, “I told you, ‘I Am.’ If you are looking for me, then let these people go.” This was so that the word he had spoken might be fulfilled: “I didn’t lose anyone of those whom you gave me.”

Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.) Jesus told Peter, “Put your sword away! Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?”

Then the company of soldiers, the commander, and the guards from the Jewish leaders

took Jesus into custody. They bound him and led him first to Annas. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. (Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it was better for one person to die for the people.)

Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Because this other disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard. However, Peter stood outside near the gate. Then the other disciple (the one known to the high priest) came out and spoke to the woman stationed at the gate, and she brought Peter in. The servant woman stationed at the gate asked Peter, "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?" "I'm not," he replied.

The servants and the guards had made a fire because it was cold. They were standing around it, warming themselves. Peter joined them there, standing by the fire and warming himself.

Meanwhile, the chief priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered, "I've spoken openly to the world. I've always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews gather. I've said nothing in private. Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I told them. They know what I said."

After Jesus spoke, one of the guards standing there slapped Jesus in the face. "Is that how you would answer the high priest?" he asked. Jesus replied, "If I speak wrongly, testify about what was wrong. But if I speak correctly, why do you strike me?" Then Annas sent him, bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.

Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing with the guards, warming himself. They asked, "Aren't you one of his disciples?" Peter denied it, saying, "I'm not." A servant of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said to him, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" Peter denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Have you ever watched a movie or TV show and certain characters seem to naturally fall into predictable types? Someone is the good guy or the protagonist - Wonder Woman or Superman, the person who is going to save the day. And then there's the antagonist - the bad guy who is always on the wrong side of everything, causing conflict and drama to develop. A good show will bring us into the drama, hooking us so when one episode ends we are ready to watch the next.

In the Gospel of John, the character of Judas is clearly one of the bad guys. When he is introduced in the story, we are told that although he is one of the chosen disciples, he is going to be the one to betray Jesus. Speaking to his disciples, Jesus put it like this: "Didn't I choose the twelve of you? Yet one of you (Judas) is a devil!" (6.70). And in today's passage we see Judas in action - he brings a company of Roman soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They come carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons - all with the purpose of arresting Jesus (18.3). This really is no surprise, as we have known this has been coming for some time. When Jesus back in chapter 11 brings Lazarus back to life, the religious leaders are threatened by Jesus - he's not only healing the sick and giving sight to the blind, but in raising Lazarus from the dead he's

shown that he truly is the Son of God, the Messiah - the One who has power over death! The religious leaders fear the worst - they say, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away our temple and our people" (11.48). It is only a matter of time before Judas assists the authorities in coming to arrest Jesus.

But unlike Judas who is clearly the bad guy, the character of Simon Peter is much more complicated. He doesn't fit neatly into one character type - he seems much more human and real to me. And so this morning I invite you to step into Peter's shoes and ask an important question: what can we learn about being a disciple from the perspective of Peter?

I think in every elementary classroom there's someone like Peter. When the teacher asks a question, there is often an enthusiastic one raising their hand saying, "I know, I know - call on me!" And in middle school the Peter-type becomes the one who no longer even waits to be called - they simply blurt out whatever they think. We saw this happen last week when Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet. When Jesus comes to Peter, he is bold enough to tell Jesus to back off. "No, Lord! You will never wash my feet (13.8)!" And when Jesus replies, "Unless I wash you, you won't have a part of me" Peter blurts out enthusiastically, "Lord, not only wash my feet but also my hands and my head!" (13.9). And after saying this Peter makes an even bolder statement, "Lord, I will follow you everywhere you go! And I will even give up my life for you!" But the all-knowing Jesus knows better, saying to Peter, "Will you really give up your life for me? I assure you that before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (13.37-38).

And so when we fast forward to today's passage it really should not surprise us at all that Peter is the loyal and bold one who takes out his sword and strikes the ear of the high priest's servant, cutting it off! While such an act of violence does not receive Jesus' approval, it demonstrates Peter's commitment to the cause. And when Jesus is taken away by the authorities to see the high priest, only Peter and another disciple are the ones who follow. While Jesus begins to be interrogated by the high priest, Peter and the other disciple stand out in the courtyard, as close as they can to the action. Remember, this is Peter who previously said, "Lord, I will follow you everywhere you go! And I will even give up my life for you!" This is the all-in Peter, the one who asked Jesus to wash not only his feet but his head and whole body, too! Peter, who was not intimidated by the Roman soldiers and the police officers who took Jesus away.

But then something remarkable happens - a lowly servant girl stationed at the gate simply asks Peter, "Aren't you one of Jesus' disciples? Aren't you one of those who have followed him?" And the bold and impulsive Peter simply says, "I am not." As Peter stands outside trying to stay warm around a fire, one of the guards asks him, "Aren't you one of his disciples?" And Peter again denies it, saying, "I'm not." And when a servant of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, says to him, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" Peter denies it for the third time. And immediately a rooster crows.

What a contrast we see between these weak "I am not" denials of Peter and Jesus' bold and confident witness before those who came to arrest him. When asked if he was Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus confidently said, "I am." When Jesus is interrogated inside by the high priest about his teachings, Jesus stands his ground, even when he is slapped in the face by one of the guards. But Peter, the usually bold one, is not even able to speak the truth when he is questioned by two servants and a guard. While it's much easier to dismiss Judas as the bad guy who does the

devil's work, it's much harder to come to terms with Peter. What are we to make of his denials? What are we to make of him publicly declaring his loyalty as a disciple and then selling out in private?

If we are honest with ourselves I think Peter's story can make us feel uncomfortable - and maybe that's because Peter's sins hit much closer to home. In many ways Peter's story is our story, and as we enter into the drama of Holy Week today we do so not to just remember what happened way back then. No, we enter the drama because we believe this is our story, too. We too are Jesus' disciples who pledge one day to follow him to the end, and then the next hour we are the ones who deny even being his disciple. I know there are times in my life when I make bold public statements of faith, declaring my loyalty to God's work in the world. And then later in private I catch myself compromising my faith in significant ways.

As you know, this past Thursday we sponsored with our Methodist friends a prayer vigil for peace for those affected by the war in Ukraine. We gathered at Riverside Park on a cool and windy evening to sing songs, read scripture and pray for peace together. We gave out packets of sunflower seeds for people to take home and plant, as the sunflower is the national symbol of peace in Ukraine, and nearly half of the world's supply of sunflower seeds come from Ukraine. I felt a sense of pride as a good number of you were able to attend, and Laz from the newspaper was there to take a few shots. We had come together to offer a public witness to faith, and as a church leader I was glad to be part of making this happen. But an interesting thing happened to me as I was putting together with Frankie those packets of seeds to distribute. As I distributed the seeds into zip lock bags I thought about a Ukrainian immigrant and neighbor who lives down the street from me. Without going into the details, I must confess that I have harbored resentment towards him for several years because of a neighborhood disagreement. There's no reason for us to have much contact, and honestly this has been fine with me. But as I packed those little packets of sunflower seeds, I was convicted of my sin. As a faith leader it was easy for me to help organize a prayer vigil for peace in the world, but as a neighbor it is hard for me to forgive the one who lives just down the street from me.

I share this as just one example of how I think we all can be like Simon Peter. We can live boldly in one moment and do good as disciples of Christ, and in other moments we can let our fears and resentments keep us from fully embracing who we are called to be as followers of Jesus. As we enter into the drama of Holy Week I invite you again to be a participant and not just a spectator. Place yourself in the crowds who welcome Jesus waving palms with shouts of "Hosanna" one day and then by the end of the week cry out "Crucify him!" Place yourself in Peter's shoes, the one who after following Jesus to the courtyard ended up standing outside at night by the fire and denying him three times. But though confession and repentance are important parts of our story this Holy Week, they should not be the only thing. ***What stands front and center of the story is the love of God come to us in Jesus. While our faith may waver, and like Peter we may miss the mark, the Good News is that in Christ we belong to One who loves his disciples all the way til the end. We belong to the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, making sure that none of them are lost.*** And later in John's Gospel we will see how the rooster crowing is not the end of Peter's story, but how forgiveness and love have the last word. So on this Palm and Passion Sunday may we not only hear this Good News but trust that it is indeed true. To God be the glory, now and always. Amen.