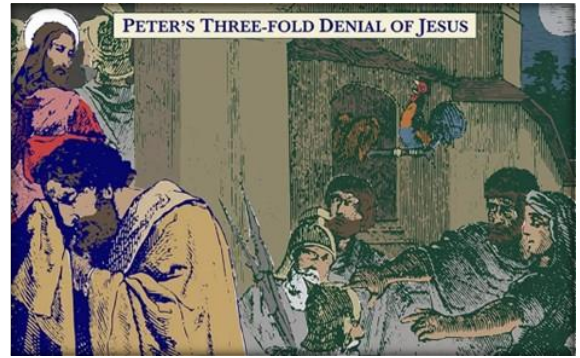


“Peter’s Denial”

Mark 14:27-42, 66-72

Three times. Three times. Three times.

We often focus on Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, arranging for his arrest by the priests and the temple guards. But I wonder if Peter’s denial of Jesus hurt him even more. Peter had been at Jesus’ right hand from the beginning and now he, in the time of Jesus’ greatest need, Peter denied even knowing him. Can you imagine Peter’s shame at his own weakness and fear. From the moment of the three-fold denial, we don’t encounter Peter in the story again until the morning of Jesus’ resurrection.



A Tale of Two Gardens

Adam was once in a garden. He had the opportunity to be obedient, to trust that God knows best and, thus, refuse to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. But Adam did not trust. He was not obedient. He came to his time of testing and trial—and failed. His disobedience set in motion the wrecking of humanity’s relationship with God and the distortion of all creation.

Jesus, on the other hand, came to a garden on that spring night in 30AD. Like Adam, Jesus’ obedience was tested. The gospel accounts of Jesus’ Gethsemane experience reveal a man struggling with his choice, struggling to be obedient to his father. But where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded. And in this lies our own salvation.

The Garden of Gethsemane is the reversal of the Garden of Eden. Jesus’ decision to remain faithful in his obedience, to press on to the cross was the means for the healing of relationship and the restoration of the cosmos. As Paul would write in his letter to the Romans, “For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (5:19).

Despite our proclamation that Jesus was fully divine and fully human, we sometimes tend to cloud over his humanity. We have trouble imagining that Jesus was truly fearful or anxious, as if the right question is “How could God be scared?” But that’s not the right question. Instead, we must strive to resist the temptation to see Jesus as less than human. Jesus faced the temptations and trials we face. For as D. Hare writes, “If Jesus was not fully human, the cross was an empty pantomime.”

To the garden

How shaken the disciples must have been. Their Passover supper together had taken a bad turn. Would one of them truly betray Jesus? Would it be Judas? And now, as Jesus led them to the Mount of Olives, a heavy darkness fell across them all.

After a bit, Jesus turned to look at the stumbling disciples. He warned them that they would all fall away. But Peter looked directly at Jesus and declared that though the rest of the disciples might abandon Jesus, Peter never would. Jesus persisted. Before this very night was out and the rooster welcomed a new morning, Peter would deny that he even knew Jesus – not once, but three times. Peter insisted that he would stay faithful all the way. The others did too. And they continued to make their way.

Jesus led them to a quiet place filled with olive trees. The grove of trees had an olive press and the garden was named for that press – Gethsemane.

As they settled in, Jesus asked his disciples to sit and to wait. He wanted to pray nearby, knowing what lay just ahead. He would have to endure this trial alone, but he needed his friends with him now, so Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to join him. Visibly distressed, troubled down to his soul, Jesus told the trio to keep watch.

When Jesus fell to the ground in prayer, he felt nearly overwhelmed. Please, Lord, let this cup pass. Isn’t there another way? Must I?...but...may your will be done, Father, not mine...

Then Jesus got up and returned to the three posted on watch. He soon saw that all three were sleeping. Confronting Peter, Jesus warned him that a trial lay ahead. If Peter couldn’t stay awake for an hour, how

could he ever hope to keep his promise to stay with Jesus to the end. Your spirit may wish to stay faithful, Jesus said, but your flesh is weak.

Jesus left the three a second time to return to prayer. And again the disciples fell asleep. When Jesus awakened them a second time, none of them could say a thing. They couldn't even look at Jesus.

And again Jesus went to pray. And again the disciples failed him. Perhaps with a note of exasperation, Jesus told them to get up. It was time. The hour had come. Let's go, he told them. The betrayer was arriving.

And sure enough, as the disciples stumbled to their feet, they saw Judas walking toward them and a large group of armed men following close behind, the arresting party sent by the chief priests. Truly, the hour had come.

Falling asleep

Could the disciples really be so blind, so weak? In Peter, James, and John, Jesus has with him those who were there from the beginning. How hurt must Jesus have been that they had not remained vigilant, sensing the foreboding of this long night? Peter had been so insistent that even if all the rest fell away, Peter would stay true, faithful, beside Jesus to wherever it was they were headed.

And yet Peter too fell asleep—three times. In another few hours he would deny knowing Jesus – three times. Of course it hurt Jesus, even though he knew how weak, how human, these men were.

I suppose that in their weakness and frailty, we can find encouragement. Jesus led them, taught them, lived with them, loved them...and built his church on them. We don't have to be super-heroes to be God's hands and feet in this world. God often uses us despite ourselves. The lessons are here if we wish to see them.

The denial

You might recall that after Jesus healed a blind man in two stages, Peter had correctly declared Jesus to be God's Messiah. However, Peter had failed to grasp that God's Messiah must suffer and die in Jerusalem. "God forbid it," Peter had exclaimed, only to be called "Satan" by Jesus for being a "stumbling block," for tempting Jesus to take another path.

Still later, after many more grave warnings about Jesus' suffering and death, the disciples had gathered with Jesus in an upstairs room to share the Passover meal. Though it had begun like a normal Passover meal, things had soon taken a dark turn. Rather than speaking of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, Jesus had reoriented the meal around himself, as if he were the lamb being slaughtered for the meal. It was his blood that would be poured out. His body that would be broken.

Afterwards, Jesus had led Peter and the disciples to the Mount of Olives on the east side of the city. There, yet again, Jesus had spoken of his death and predicted that his disciples would flee like a scattered flock. But Peter protested. Others may flee, but not Peter. He was the Rock. He would stand with Jesus. He would never fail his Lord! Imagine how Peter must have felt when Jesus had turned to him, telling him that he would soon deny three times that he even knew Jesus.

Probably, even in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter still hadn't really believed that Jesus would end up dead. Surely there must be a way out. How could God's Messiah end up on a cross?!

Yet, Jesus had been hauled away to the house of the high priest where members of the Sanhedrin had gathered to wait for Jesus to be brought to them. As Jesus made his way to his trial, Peter had followed close behind.

When they arrived, Jesus was taken inside. Peter waited outside in the courtyard. As it was a chilly evening, Peter warmed himself by a fire.

After a bit, a servant girl passed Peter and turned to stare at him. When she accused him of being with the rebellious Nazarene, Peter panicked...and he denied it.

Not long after, the girl reiterated her accusation and Peter reiterated his denial.

Finally, some of those gathered around challenged Peter. Of course, he knew Jesus. He was obviously from Galilee. What else could he be doing there? Then, to his everlasting shame, Peter not only denied knowing Jesus for a third time, he rained curses down on his accusers and swore that he was telling the truth. Such oaths were taken before the Lord God Almighty.

And Peter remembered his promises. Confronted with his abject failure to stand with Jesus, the Galilean fisherman broke down and wept. Surely, great rivers of tears flowed as Peter let the full weight of his own betrayal fall on him. Yes, he was afraid. Who could blame him? Peter knew quite well what happened to the followers of a failed, would-be Messiah.¹ They were rounded up too. Peter's fear might be an explanation, but it was no excuse. He had betrayed the man to whom he had pledged everlasting faithfulness. Peter would remain lost in his personal darkness until a few women came to him early on Sunday morning, making the most remarkable, even ridiculous, claim.

Peter's failure seems the end of the road for him, as the cross seems to be for Jesus. But God is a gracious God, abounding in faithfulness. Jesus will be resurrected and Peter will be redeemed. Indeed, Peter will go on to be the rock on which our Lord's church is built. On the day of Pentecost a few weeks out, Peter, empowered by the Spirit of Christ, will rise to preach a strong sermon that would have taken much courage to deliver. But, by the power of Christ, Peter is made into a new man. For as Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone; the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). That "anyone" includes not only Peter, but you and me and all those who have placed their trust in the Son of Man.

¹ When Jesus was arrested and crucified, he would have been seen by everyone, including his own followers, as a failed, though well-meaning, would-be Messiah, of which there had been several. Amongst first-century Jews, there was simply no conception of a crucified Messiah. Surely, in the hours leading up to and after Jesus' crucifixion, Peter would have thought that his declaration of Jesus as Messiah was simply, though inexplicably, wrong.