

Written Copy: Luke 22:61-62 "Return from Denial"

Midweek Lenten Service #4

Wednesday, March 17th, 2021

Text: Luke 22:61-62

⁶¹ And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

Exegetical Statement

Jesus has been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, seized forcibly by the Roman Soldiers and Temple Guards and marched off to the house of the High Priest Caiaphas. But as He showed before His arrest, He is in control of all things, allowing all this to happen, allowing the "power of darkness" to have its way because its His Father's will. He has not denied the Father but remains perfectly obedient. Peter on the other hand is allowing distance to come in between Him and the Savior He promised to stand beside, even if it meant his own arrest and death. He does follow Jesus to Caiaphas' house, but at a safe distance. This distance will continue to grow. He enters the courtyard and joins with others who were with the party that had come to arrest Jesus. Peter like them waits to see how things will turn out. Because he sits near the fire to warm himself on a cold night, he is recognized by a young servant girl who says "He was one of those who were with Jesus at His arrest." But Peter denies that He even knows who Jesus is. Matthew tells us Peter gets up and walks away from the fire so that no one else might recognize him. But a short time later another man points out that Peter is one of Jesus' disciples. Here Peter denies being even a follower of Him saying "I am not!" About an hour passes, and yet a third man asserts emphatically, "I tell you the truth, this guy was most certainly with Jesus when He was arrested, listen to his accent, He is from Galilee just like Jesus is!" Peter responds, "I have no idea what you are talking about!" This man has spoken the truth, and it was Peter's time to own up to the truth. The cat is out of the bag. But instead Peter denies the obvious, telling a boldface lie, and does so even speaking with His Galilean accent. As He says this third denial the rooster crows, and all Jesus had told Peter has come true. Jesus turns to look at Peter, and his conviction of his sin is complete. With heart crushed he runs out sobbing uncontrollably. His sinful separation from His Savior is at its furthest. But the Spirit is at work in Peter showing him his sin and moving him to deep grief over it. He is now ready for the risen Lord to bring him the Gospel of forgiveness on Easter morning, and restore him to his place as Jesus' much-loved disciple.

Focus Statement:

For all the times that we deny our Lord and our faith in Him, Jesus stood true to the Father. He knows our inability to remain faithful in the face of peer pressure and temptation. In His life He was faithful in our place. And in His suffering and death He suffered for our sinful selfish faithlessness. As with Peter, He comes to us when we are broken and returns us to the fold of His family, strengthening our faith in Word and Sacrament so we can better stand next time.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Peter was warned by Jesus of times of temptation to fall away that would come but didn't take them seriously enough to seek protection and strength in prayer. When they came he was unready and responded instinctively in self-preservation from his sinful selfish heart. When our faith is challenged and its time to step up and speak for Jesus in condemnation of sin but love for the sinner, we think about what our friends and the world will say, and out of self-preservation remain quiet. When the opportunity comes to witness our faith, we fall silent afraid of what those around us will think, or say, or do.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Know that when you fail to stand up for Him and your faith, He forgives you. And He offers repeated chances to live out our confession before each other and the world. Even as our sin tries to drive a wedge, He keeps drawing us closer through the Spirit's work in Word and Sacrament.

Subject Sentence: Sin Drives Us Away, Jesus Brings Us Back

Introduction: Peter's Road Thus Far: Falling Farther Away

Tonight we see Peter at his worst. We've seen him at other times have bright shining moments, such as **Matthew 16:15-16** ¹⁵ **He (Jesus) said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"** ¹⁶ **Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** It doesn't get much better than that. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter gives the confession that the Church of Jesus Christ is founded on. But there have been those not so stellar moments such as shortly after that confession when Jesus begins to teach them what it means according the Father's will and plan that He is the Christ. **Matthew 16:22-23** ²² **And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."** ²³ **But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."** Nothing like going from being the star Disciple to being called "Satan" by your Lord and Savior. Then there was all the subsequent times Jesus predicted the arrest and suffering that He is enduring during our Gospel reading. Peter and the other Disciples responded in not so stellar fashion by making this the occasion to argue about who among them would be the greatest in Jesus' coming reign and rule. But this three-time denial we read of in tonight's Gospel Lesson is the worst.

Peter was not prepared for what he had about to face. Although he should've been. Along with those repeated warnings of Jesus' concerning His impending suffering and death, He specifically warned Peter earlier that evening of what was to come. As they left the Upper Room and were headed to the Mt. of Olives (**Matthew 26:31-35**) ³¹ **Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'** ³² **But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."** ³³ **Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."** ³⁴ **Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."** ³⁵ **Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.** Jesus predicted that the very event we read of in our Gospel Lesson tonight would happen, but Peter was not listening, or was not taking it seriously. He thought he was strong enough in faith and in love toward his Master that no one could break him or drag him away.

So it is when they get to the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus goes off to pray, and encourages the disciples to do the same, praying that they will not fall into temptation, instead Peter falls asleep. Then everything quickly unravels. Judas and the armed contingent of soldiers and Temple Guard, and others with weapons show up. Peter's last bit of bravado disappears when he cuts off the ear of the unarmed servant Malchus and Jesus rebukes his action, healing the man. It is then that Peter and the Disciples, all of whom had promised to stand by Jesus no matter what, all take off.

But give Peter this much credit, he has not abandoned his Lord altogether yet. As Jesus is seized and marched off to Caiaphas, Peter is following, but at a goodly distance. Just close enough that he can see the torches marching back toward Jerusalem and follow them to their destination, but not close enough that they might see and apprehend him too. So much for standing by Jesus even if it means his arrest and death.

Peter's physical distance is symbolic of a greater distance that is growing in his heart. This distancing began when Peter denied Jesus' statement that he and the rest would fall away that night. It sounded good when it came from Peter's lips, but it was an empty promise. It was based on a strength and courage that Peter didn't have within himself. He thought he was prepared for whatever may come. But he wasn't. He didn't have what it takes to stand alone and face the power of darkness that Jesus was facing. When Peter relied on himself instead of listening to and relying on his Savior, the distance began to grow. Faith in himself was not good enough. He was falling away.

In that respect what follows in the courtyard of Caiaphas is no surprise. And you have to wonder, as Peter entered and sat down by the fire, what he was thinking? These men and women he sat with were some of the same ones that made up Judas' arrest party that had just seized Jesus. But it was dark, everyone was focused on this Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps Peter can slip in unnoticed. It's cold, and so he gets close to the fire. But at the same time, he is getting closer to the light, and to being recognized. Maybe his promise to stand by Jesus is still ringing in his ears and this is his way of compensating for his early action of running off. But the distance in his heart that came from ignoring Jesus' warning and words and instead relying on himself is growing. And when the questioning starts, Peter shows once again, he is woefully unprepared.

You can see the distance continue to grow with his answer to each question put to him. The first is in **Luke 22:56-57** ⁵⁶ **Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, "This man also was with him."** ⁵⁷ **But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."** The question hits him like a roundhouse punch coming at him unaware. Not ready for it he acts instinctively from the gut, from his sinful heart. Peter goes into self-preservation mode. It overrules his promise to stand by Jesus, it overrules his love for Jesus. All that matters is that he is not discovered and taken to stand next to Jesus before that ruling council, that he not suffer what Jesus is suffering. Now this is just a young servant girl asking him. In and of herself not much for Peter to worry about. But there are more than likely some tough characters hanging around that fire too. Perhaps Temple Guards and personal servants of Caiaphas, civilians who acted more like bodyguards. Peter knows all these are listening to the question and observing his response.

Matthew's account at this point tells us that Peter got up from the fire and moved toward the entrance of the courtyard. But its only (Luke 22:58) **a little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not."** This man is challenging Peter's earlier denial, "**You there! You are also one of those who follow Jesus!**" Now Peter in ramped up self-preservation denial mode denies his association with those 11 men he was the De facto leader of. Peter says, "**I don't know Him, and I don't know them!**" And the distance keeps growing.

Luke 22:59 And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, "Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean." This man says "**Certainly**", or better yet "**This is the truth of the matter, you were with Him!**" As Matthew's Gospel account adds (Matthew 26:73b) "**Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.**" Here is the truth, out in the open. When Peter spoke his previous denial, he spoke with an accent that identified him as being from the same region that everyone there knows Jesus is from: Galilee. It's all out in the open. A perfect time for Peter to recant and confess the truth. But he can't. The distance is too far. Relying upon himself he has separated himself from his Lord and Savior. So with that telltale Galilean accent Peter fulfills Jesus' prediction: **Luke 22:60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed.** And there it is. Just as Jesus said it would happen, it does. Peter denies even being from the same region as Jesus as well as knowing anything about Him, even though by this time all of Jerusalem knows who He is. Anyone who lived in Galilee with Peter's accent would've known about or more than likely witnessed Jesus' teaching, miracles, and healing He had been doing for the last three years. Peter's betrayal and falling away is complete.

Luke 22:61-62 ⁶¹ **And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times."** ⁶² **And he went out and wept bitterly.** Even though you and may not have been in the same place Peter was, we know how he is feeling. We have had those times when we should've stood up for our faith, and we failed. Times when we could've witnessed to the miraculous work Jesus has done and is doing in our life but held back for fear of what others might say or think. We've remained silent for fear of losing our friends. We've remained silent when we go out to eat, not wanting to show who we are by praying at the table, or even asking our server if we could pray for her, because we're worried about what others might think. We've failed to live up to the call of Jesus to be His witnesses. Perhaps we see ourselves as long time Lutherans who are prepared for anything, just as Peter thought. Yet we've allowed distance to come between us and our Savior from our lack of participation in the study of His Word, and the work that His Spirit does through it.

Distance is the result when we fail to avail ourselves of the work the Spirit does through Word and Sacrament. And it is not the LORD's fault, it's ours. As our Old Testament Lesson bears witness to (**Isaiah 59:1-2**) ¹ **Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;** ² **but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.** When we fail to recognize our sinful opposition to our LORD it causes separation. And those who fall so far that they no longer feel the need to repent may find God's face hidden from them. **Isaiah 59:12-13** ¹² **For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities:** ¹³ **transgressing, and denying the LORD, and turning back from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.** As unrepentant sins multiply in our life they will inevitably result in our being denied by our LORD, as we turn away from following Him, to follow our own sinful heart's desire. If you have never wept like Peter did over your denying of your faith in Christ, perhaps you should.

But let's revisit that final scene of our Gospel Lesson again. **Luke 22:61-62** ⁶¹ **And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times."** ⁶² **And he went out and wept bitterly.** You see, this is not the end of the story. And despite what you may think at first, that look that Jesus gave Peter was not a look of contempt, or anger, but a look of love. It's the same love and the same look we have when His Spirit looks at us through His Word of Law to show us our sin. It's the same look that He has when our hearts are crushed over our sinful denial of our Savior. Jesus knows it's what is most needed for His Gospel to do its work.

Peter ran out and wept bitterly, but that's not the end of the story. Jesus, in His place, was standing silent and strong in the face of all that the powers of darkness working through sinful men were throwing at Him. And when it came time for Him to give His confession as to who He was stood, He stood strong in the faith. **Matthew 26: 63b-64** ^{63b} **And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."** ⁶⁴ **Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."** Even though He knew this confession would seal His fate Jesus stood firm on who He was before the Father. And He did so for you and me. Christ remained faithful for all the times you and I act faithlessly and deny who we are as baptized children of God by our own words and actions. And in fulfilling the Father's plan and will for Him, Jesus suffered and died to forgive us for all those sinful words, actions, and attitudes that would otherwise separate us from our Creator God forever. He looks upon us when our heart breaks over our sin, and tells us that the final word is "You are forgiven! Forgiven of it all."

He tells us that as he was hanging from the cross. He said it with His last breath, **“It is finished.”** But He yells it even louder from the empty tomb. Peter was not left to wallow in his despair very long. His heart was more than ready for the personal visit he received from the resurrected Jesus, when Jesus personally came to Peter and assured him that he was forgiven. And then later on, in the presence of the other Disciples, the Lord asks Peter three times **“Do you love me?”**, so that Peter could respond three times **“You know I love you Lord.”** Jesus came to Peter to publicly restore him to his position as a Disciple and prepare him for his future vocation as an Apostle.

And He comes to you, even as you weep bitter tears in your heart over your sins. He comes in the Divine Service in the words of the Absolution when I say **“In the stead and by the command of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!”** He comes to you when you confess to Him privately, and then meditate on His words to you in **John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.** For God so loved **you**, that He gave His Son Jesus so that despite your sin and your denial, **you** will not perish, but through His gift of faith receive eternal life. He comes to you in the words of our hymns this evening: LSB #431 “Not All the Blood of Beasts” v2 “But Christ the heavenly Lamb, Takes all our sins away”.

Conclusion

Jesus, out of love for Peter, warned him of the times of suffering and temptation ahead. He does the same for you and me here this night. **1 Peter 5:8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.** Know that the adversary is out there. Know that times of testing and confrontation will come. Know that you will confront situations where you are tempted to renounce your faith in Jesus and all that He stands for. Especially in this ever-darkening age when our culture and government turn away from what we hold to be truth and pushes the agenda of darkness in mandating acceptance of same sex marriage and gender transformation. Stand firm not in faith toward yourself, but the faith that is given by the Spirit in our baptism, built up through the study of His Word, and through your participation in His Sacraments. Even then, since we are sinful broken human beings, there will come a time when we succumb and fall. But when that happens, know that Jesus looks upon you not with hate or disappointment, but with love. He looks upon you with that same love that sent Him to the cross. He looks upon you and shares with you His Gospel of forgiveness. The same forgiveness he shared with Peter who closes our reading from his letter with **1 Peter 5:10-11 ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.** Return to the LORD, even when you are guilty of the sin of denial. He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love for you. Amen.