

2nd Sunday in Lent

"I, Peter"

Luke 22:54-62

Rev. David K. Wood

February 25, 2024

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

On this second Sunday in Lent, we are continuing our sermon series on “Personalities of the Passion” by taking a close look at Simon Peter- Jesus’s chief disciple. There are many high points in Peter's life- there was his decision to drop his nets and forsake everything to follow Jesus; his great profession of faith that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God; his sermon on the day of Pentecost that converted 4000 souls; his vision that he shared with the church that God had extended his promise of salvation to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. The account we’re looking at this morning had to be the ABSOLUTE LOW point in his ministry, if not, his LIFE. Yet, as we shall see, what was the most tragic and shameful event ever to befall him, ALSO became the occasion when he learned the real meaning of love and forgiveness and became a truly humble servant of God. The lesson for us this morning is that the person who said “there are no second acts” was dead wrong, that God can take the worst chapter of our lives and use it to transform us into his humble, obedient disciples.

I want to pick up the story following our Lord's arrest in Gethsemane where he is betrayed by Judas with a kiss. Jesus is then bound and led back to Jerusalem without his disciples who have all fled the scene. But two of the twelve--Peter and John--rally from their panic and follow the arrest party from a distance. Jesus is first taken to the house of Annas- the high priest and most influential member of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. If the high priest could determine there was enough guilt, he could bring Jesus up on charges before the Sanhedrin which could then recommend that Jesus be turned over to Pilate for PILATE ALONE had the power to sentence persons to death. While before Annas, and then his son-in-law Caiaphas, Jesus was ridiculed and struck, all the while responding with patience and meekness.

But as there was high drama beginning to develop inside the palace of the high priest, just OUTSIDE, there was ANOTHER drama taking form. Peter and John had managed to slip through the gates into the courtyard, perhaps within listening distance of the interrogation going on inside. The soldiers who had arrested Jesus, had completed their work and were huddled around an open fire to warm them in the cold night air. John probably hurried across the court into the hall to listen to the proceedings but Peter, perhaps somewhat fearful, remained back, staying close to the fire.

No doubt the group that had gathered around it was laughing about Jesus, but Peter just maintained his silence, trying to fit in with the bunch of scoffers. In the light cast off from the flames, everybody's face was made visible and a servant-girl of all people, a lowly maid, recognized Peter as a friend of Jesus. "This man was also with him," she insists. Keep in mind, this wasn't some Roman official or member of the Jewish priesthood who questioned him but rather a young girl, one who had absolutely no power or authority or possible way of bringing harm to him. Martin Luther, in his commentary on the Book of Genesis, writes what happens after the first couple's sin

in the Garden of Eden, that in the wake of their disobedience, Adam and Eve are now filled with SUCH DREAD, that even the sound of “the rustling of a leaf upon the ground” was enough to give them a heart attack, SUCH was their fear of discovery by God! Well, such had to have been the fear of discovery that Peter was feeling in HIS heart. I’m sure the remark from the young servant girl surprised him and with his heart racing a mile a minute, he emphatically denied her accusation, "Woman, I do not know him." His denial and curses seemed to suffice for a while until ANOTHER servant drew close to him and reiterated what the other had said earlier, "You are one of them TOO!" Peter, beginning to panic, issues ANOTHER quick denial, "I am not!" At this point, Peter must be thinking, "Where’s John so we can get the heck out of here. If we don’t leave soon, WE’LL soon be arrested and then find OURSELVES on trial, just like JESUS is." Yet, despite his growing trepidation, our text says he remained there for another hour.

No long afterwards, he was approached by yet a THIRD person who stopped and scrutinized him closely. "Certainly, this man was ALSO with him for he is a Galilean TOO," he said. Apparently, Peter's distinct Galilean accent came through and now he had to defend himself MORE FORCEFULLY THAN EVER. Out of his mouth came profanity and curses as he reiterated his denial a THIRD time, "Man, I am no Christian; I am no disciple of Jesus. I do not know what you are talking about!" He desperately wanted to prove to him and the others that he had nothing to do with Christ ONCE AND FOR ALL.

At that instant, while Peter was still speaking, a cock crowed. Across the courtyard just inside the hall, Jesus turned and looked directly at Peter. Peter caught sight of his Lord staring at him and, in that quick instant, remembered what Jesus had said earlier to him- that "before a cock crows today, you will deny me NOT ONCE but THREE times." Peter got up, left the courtyard, and in the shadows of that dark night that was yet to get STILL BLACKER, he wept bitterly.

Now let’s recap what has just gone on here. We have before us a scene of high drama, one more chilling and tension-filled than any produced by Alfred Hitchcock. It becomes a study in contrasts: Jesus has been inside the council hall confronting the high priest and the rest of the Jewish leaders. He has declared under oath that he is the Son of the living God. In response to it, Annas rips his own robe in protest and the religious tribunal, which had been set up to evaluate and judge Jesus, feels it is left no option but to sentence him to death. Meanwhile, OUTSIDE the hall, there is ANOTHER trial going on- this one involving PETER. His accusers are not Israel's great rabbis or legal scholars but a couple of young servant girls who insist that Peter was a friend of Jesus. Before God, Peter DENIES that he is friend of the Galilean; DENIES that he even KNOWS him. After 3½ years of close, intimate comradeship with Jesus, after being promised the leadership of that group after Jesus is gone, he hasn’t even the courage or the faith to say that he has even HEARD of Jesus, much less FOLLOWED him. From out of the SAME mouth that professed to his Lord, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," and that had boldly promised, "Lord, with you I am ready to go both to prison and death," NOW COMES the profession that he IS no Christian and certainly no follower of that JESUS fellow! And so we see how more important to Peter than his devotion to Jesus is his instinct for SELF-PRESERVATION, that he was going to SAVE his life rather than LOSE IT at all costs.

Thus, we see TWO trials going on at the same time- Jesus is the defendant in one while

Peter, his trusted friend and first lieutenant, is the defendant in the other. In the first, the high priest and the Sanhedrin—the most powerful representatives of Israel’s religious system—stand as Christ’s accusers; in the other, it is a young girl and a couple of off-duty servants. Jesus stands before the court in meekness and patience; Peter cowers before that fire in fear and cowardice. Jesus is asked straight out, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" to which he confidently replies, "Yes, I am"; while Peter is asked whether he is MERELY A FRIEND of the Galilean to which he responds with cursings and total denials. Where Jesus is willing to LOSE his life so that Peter and James and John and the rest of his followers might live; Peter can only think of SAVING his life that Christ might die- forsaken and alone. Friends, this is drama at its BEST, but drama not written by any Hollywood script writer- this was for REAL!

Now what are the practical implications of all this? What meaning can this account have for US this morning? There are indeed many, but I want to quickly give you three lessons based on Jesus’s earlier talk with Peter while they were yet in the Upper Room, just prior to his leaving for Gethsemane. In their final conversation together until after our Lord’s resurrection four days later, Jesus had warned Peter that Satan had demanded permission to sift him like wheat. Peter was going to experience trial and temptation in the hours ahead UNLIKE ANYTHING he had ever known before. The hearts of his and of the other eleven were to be searched, their hidden weaknesses discovered. The vain, self-confident, self-willed and impetuous Simon, son of Jonas, was to be separated from his devoted, chivalrous, heroic and rock-like alter ego- Peter. The disciples would be pushed to the LIMITS of their commitment to Jesus and from within such a crucible, they would DISCOVER FOR THEMSELVES what they were really made of. In the end, they DESERTED their leader, every one of them, and even DENIED HIM to save themselves.

Now Jesus’s disciples were not bad men. On the contrary, they were WELL-INTENTIONED men with a level of genuine devotion towards him. However, they were WEAK IN FAITH! Jesus had on more than one occasion told them, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priest and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day." He had instructed them, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? For whosoever is ashamed of me and my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory, and the glory of the Father, and of the holy angels." (Luke 9:22-26)

The disciples heard from Jesus’s own mouth that he would soon be rejected and killed at the hands of men, BUT HAD THEY FAITH, they would have ALSO heard and believed the SECOND part of his statement- his promise that death would have no hold over him for he would triumph over it and be raised up on the third day. The disciples heard in Christ’s words a call to obedience that involved sacrifice and EVEN DEATH, but had they the FAITH, they would ALSO have heard him assure them not to worry, for death would not contain them EITHER- that as he would be raised up, so would those who followed him BE RAISED UP AS WELL. Becoming a disciple of Christ’s had its risks, one that involved great sacrifice to both life and limb, but it required FAITH-faith to hear and believe Jesus’s promise that those who REMAINED STEADFAST, those who

PERSEVERED TO THE END would one day OVERCOME THE WORLD, that ETERNITY IN GOD'S KINGDOM IN THE PRESENCE OF THEIR LORD would be their reward!

This account shows us how weak people--EVEN GOOD, WELL-INTENTIONED persons—can become when they have no faith. FAITH, on the other hand, HEARS THE PROMISES of Christ and BELIEVES THEM and BASES ITS LIFE upon them. WITH FAITH, we KNOW that we are children of God and that NOTHING can ever separate us from his either his presence or his love. It means that though we walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we will fear no evil, FOR JESUS IS WITH US to help us through the worst crises that can possibly befall us. He will GIVE US STRENGTH in our times of testing and BEAR US UP when we fall. Faith is REALLY BELIEVING this, not just in our HEADS but in our HEARTS AS WELL, living with confidence and trust BECAUSE of it.

If this account of Peter's denial reminds us of the promises and rewards of faith, it ALSO shows how Jesus promises to help us maintain faith in troublesome times BY UNITING HIS FAITH WITH OUR OWN. He told Peter, "Simon, I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." One of the most forgotten aspects of Christ's ministry for us today is that Christ continues to pray for each one of us that OUR faith might not fail, that it remains strong. You see, Jesus knows each one of his sheep individually and personally. He is aware of every one of our troubles, he understands our life situation, and he knows just how fragile and tenuous our faith often is. Therefore, he prays to his Heavenly Father that our faith will remain strong in the face of besetting doubts and our many temptations.

The Apostle Paul reassured the church in Rome of this when he wrote, "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself INTERCEDES FOR US with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit INTERCEDES FOR THE SAINTS according to the will of God." And again, "Christ Jesus is he who died, yes, rather who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, WHO ALSO INTERCEDES FOR US." Christ is ALWAYS interceding on our behalf before God, praying "Father, GIVE THEM PEACE when your children feel threatened. GIVE THEM A SENSE OF YOUR LOVE when they feel most alone. GIVE THEM HOPE IN YOUR PROMISES when they most despair and grant them your light to lead them when the way before them grows dark." Jesus is our constant prayer partner, our constant faith partner, so that when we get on OUR knees to speak to God, Christ is on HIS knees beside us, praying to the Father with us and on our behalf.

Peter was kept from falling away because of special grace- the prayers of Jesus. And WHAT did Jesus pray? Not that Peter be exempt from Satan's sifting process, nor that he would never fall-every child of God must endure such siftings and failures in order that we might find out just how weak we really are in our self-confidence. But Jesus prayed that Peter's fall might not be ruinous, that his terrible sin might be followed by repentance and godly sorrow and not a hardening of his heart as we saw last week with Judas. Our hope lies in the fact that Christ continues to pray for US, even now as I preach, that he unites his strong faith to our weak faith. It is that special grace, his intercessory prayer on our behalf, that will keep OUR hearts tender and trusting towards him- even after we stumble. Peter may have denied Jesus, but Jesus could NEVER DENY PETER,

nor will he EVER DENY US.

And one final lesson we can learn from this account is that we are assured that when WE fail, as we INEVITABLY WILL, we can LEARN and EVEN GROW from our experiences of weakness and failure. At the very same moment JESUS finds himself on trial INSIDE the great hall of Annas's home where he is being judged by Israel's religious elite, PETER is engaged in a trial of his own OUTSIDE the hall, where he is found defending himself and ultimately being judged, not by the Sanhedrin—Israel's Supreme Court—but by the WORLD. As I entitled last week's sermon "I, Judas" to show how Judas is actually a mirror held up to our face to help us see the darkness that is too-often within OURSELVES, I entitled this morning's sermon "I, Peter" because HE TOO—SIMON PETER—serves as a mirror, revealing to us the dark places of our lives which we'd rather deny or keep hidden or try to forget. And in the same way that we all find ourselves to be JUDAS from time-to-time—scheming and lying and betraying those who often love us the MOST, there are NO LESS those moments when WE become Simon Peter- periodically demonstrating the same courage and devotion to his Lord that HE did, but ALSO revealing the same impetuosity and weakness of faith that often befell HIM.

The GOOD NEWS for us, however, is that God doesn't use our failures to CONDEMN US--to TEAR US DOWN and remind us how HORRIBLE we've been--but INSTEAD, they become occasions whereby God is able to teach us lessons on his GRACE AND FORGIVENESS. LIFE WITH CHRIST becomes A GREAT CLASSROOM in which we discover the meaning of humility and love and trusting God, while THE TRIALS OF OUR FAITH become our EXAMS- the lives of the saints from Abraham to Moses to David, from the disciples right up to the saints of the present time all testify to this.

Like Peter and the REST of the disciples, WE experience lapses of faith AS WELL. Like THEM, EACH OF US has known times of backsliding- and sometimes that fall backwards has been long and hard and injurious to ourselves and others. At the moment we think we've got our act most together, just when we are feeling proud of the high moral caliber of our lives, just when we are most involved in the church and service for the Lord, THAT is when the fall often comes, when the lapse frequently occurs. We might start drinking heavily or experimenting with drugs or perhaps indulge in an extramarital affair to two. More and more, we surrender to our darker passions; we break trust with people; we develop bitter attitudes with the result that our hearts become filled with shame and our conscience never stops accusing us. We're left with a soul that never stops reminding us just how terrible we are and unworthy to be God's child.

But it is THEN that we hear the Lord gently calling us back to faith and obedience. It is not a voice of anger, a voice of hostility or retribution- he offers us the same look of compassion and forgiveness that HE OFFERED PETER in the courtyard following his denials. He, ABOVE ALL, understands the weakness of our flesh and the deep fears and anxieties that encompass and fill us. Yes, he is concerned when we fall, when through our words and deeds we deny him before the world. But even MORE, he is concerned about us AFTERWARDS, how we respond to our failures. Do we CONTINUE in our sin? Do we ALLOW THEM to pile higher and higher until we can no longer hear his voice or receive his look, until our conscience passes from numbness into death? Or do we deal with them the only way we can, the same way PETER dealt with HIS- with

HUMILITY and CONTRITION and FAITH.

And we can repent of our failures with contrition and faith **PRECISELY BECAUSE** Christ never accuses us, **BECAUSE** he does not condemn us, **BECAUSE** he extends to us forgiveness and restoration. Hence, our sin, which is a **VERY SERIOUS THING**, can result in a **DEEPER LOVE** for him and **GREATER DEDICATION** to his service. Jesus offers us a new beginning, the chance to start all over again with a fresh clean slate **IF ONLY WE WILL TAKE IT**. The struggles in our life, the lapses in our commitment to Christ do not mean all is lost for us. Instead, they serve as **OPPORTUNITIES FOR US TO DISCOVER IN AN ALTOGETHER NEW WAY** the meaning of Jesus's love for us. That love and grace lifted Peter up from the brink of despair and taught him the true meaning of meekness, patience, wisdom and compassion. Only **AFTER HIS FALL** was Peter ever able to become the true leader of the disciples Jesus called him to be. This account assures us that sin cannot only be forgiven, but **EVEN TURNED TO GOOD ACCOUNT** in ourselves and for others.

I want to close with an old legend that says that sometimes when Peter was preaching, he would hear the crowing of cock and for a moment he would be overcome with embarrassment and confusion. Then he would recover himself and preach with a new and more burning zeal and earnestness and tenderness. Likewise, may the failures in our **OWN** lives serve to remind **US** of Christ's surpassing love, of his faithfulness despite our own unfaithfulness, and may just such a knowledge fill **OUR** hearts with a new and more burning zeal and earnestness and tenderness even as it did for **PETER**. Let us pray...

*Our Father and Our God, again we ask that you would stoop to our **OWN** weakness and help us, in our frailty, to understand the depth and breadth of Peter's sin, that we might remember and confront the many times **WE TOO** have betrayed a spouse, a friend, or a family member and, by extension, betrayed **YOU**. **FORGIVE US** for our cowardice and lack of faith, and **FILL US** with the resolve to take the more demanding and difficult stand when it means doing the **RIGHT THING** instead of the more expedient or least costly course of action. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*