

“Denial”

Zechariah 9:9-10; John 12:12-16;
Luke 22:31-34, 47-61

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
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We read those passages about Jesus coming into Jerusalem. I wonder, during that time, what was happening with Peter. We don't hear exactly what Peter was doing. My guess is he was pretty jubilant. He was there with the crowd. Perhaps he was even encouraging people as they walked along. I wonder if in the back of his mind he thought, “Lord, why did you have to rebuke me? This is exactly what I told you we should be doing—entering into Jerusalem; letting you become king.” It was a triumphal moment and I bet Peter was excited about it as they entered in. As much of a triumphal moment as it was, it feels a little bittersweet because we know where it's leading.

And yet, we think about that idea of a triumphal entry. It was exactly what Peter, and perhaps many others, was thinking about—that passage out of Zechariah. It makes me think about how much the world looks for triumphal entries. How many times in our own lives, or what do we see in our own lives, where we want God to enter triumphantly? Where do we want God's triumph to shine forth?

Peter was sure this was the beginning of something grand, I would guess. Peter went one evening shortly thereafter to be at the supper they had together in that upper room. It was probably a Passover supper. It was a time when Jesus began talking again about the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. I wonder what was going through Peter's mind. What is he talking about, this new covenant that comes out of his body and blood?

And then they have a direct conversation where Jesus is telling Peter that this is going to be a hard moment. He talks about it as Satan sifting them. It's going to be a hard moment and Peter is not going to do as well as he wants to do. Peter jumps up and says, “I'll follow you to prison. I'll die for you.” That's when Jesus has to say, “Peter, you'll deny me three times before the cock crows this night.” Can you imagine being Peter, wondering what he's talking about? He makes a promise to Jesus in that moment that he will follow him to prison and to death.

It makes me think about making promises. There are often times in my own life where I've recognized that, in the heat of the moment or when I thought I had well understood the way things were going, I made a promise. And then things changed in ways I didn't expect. It's not always easy to keep your promise. It's not even always possible, is it? But Peter makes a promise and I think he makes it with a full sense of commitment. He's not just making a promise to butter Jesus up. He really wants to follow Jesus.

And then they go out to the garden of Gethsemane. After a little consternation on Jesus' part about them not being able to stay awake for prayer, they are talking and here comes this crowd. Peter sees it and thinks “now is the time.” That's what he is expecting. It's time! If you read John, Peter is the one who cuts that ear off. He's

ready at that moment to die for Jesus. He wants to go into battle. He's ready to fight. Isn't that what we might expect? That's the way revolutions happen. That's the way things get changed. We have to fight, don't we? Jesus tells him to put the sword away. He even says in Matthew that those who draw the sword and live by it will die by it.

What's Peter going to do? Here Jesus tells him to put the sword away. Again, he doesn't understand the full extent of what Jesus is doing. It feels like Jesus is simply living out what he has told folks all along. Early on, in the Sermon on the Mount, he says when somebody asks for your coat, give them your cloak as well. So it feels like that's what he's doing here. He's giving up what is his. Indeed, what he is giving up is his life. He is giving himself. But at that moment, Peter can't see it, doesn't understand it. It's such a contrast from what he expects according to the world's ways. What we expect to do is fight, not give ourselves away, not to enter into the lion's mouth without a fight. And yet, Jesus goes with the crowd, lets himself be taken away.

So what is Peter supposed to do? Is he curious? Does he wonder what's happening? He follows along on the edge of the crowd. Maybe as they get into the courtyard he goes in to see what's happening. They light the fire. It must have been a cool evening; it sounds like people gathered around it. Maybe he forgot about staying on the outskirts and just wanted to get warm. And then a servant girl recognizes him. He says, "No, I'm not one of them." What was he thinking? Maybe he thought, "I don't want to make waves here. I just want to sit here quietly and see what's going on. I'm not part of that."

And then a second person asks him, "Weren't you one of those followers?" Again he says no. It's hard to know what's going through his mind. Does he just want to feel like he's invisible? Is he worried about what's going to happen if he says yes? In any case, he says again, "No, I'm not one of them."

Finally there's one guy that seems to keep asking. "You were there. You are one of them, huh? You're a Galilean. I bet you're one of them, huh? Huh? Huh?" You can almost feel the exasperation in Peter when he says, "Listen! No! No man, I'm not one of them. I don't know the man." And then the cock crows and Peter knows what he's done.

It's an amazing moment and it's a moment when he begins to enter into the darkness of that week, into a moment of real struggle, a moment when he recognizes he's broken the trust, he's broken his promise and he doesn't know what's going on. Perhaps at this point he says, "God, where are you?" Does he know what God is up to at that moment? He seems to be wondering. It feels to me like it's one of those moments where he could really say, "I don't know where God is." Even, "Is there a God?" One could get really lost in that thought, and for the moment, I think Peter is. But we can look back, I think, and hear fully what Jesus said to Peter. He said, "Not only will you deny me, but once you have fallen away and returned, support your brothers and sisters."

So in the moment of darkness, it's hard to see what's going to happen. There are moments when we wonder "Where is God?" But there is a return. There is the

opportunity to return and then when we have returned, what is the opportunity we have? To support one another. We will walk with Peter as this happens to him.

Now, I think it's a wonderful thing that generally we don't all enter into the darkness together at the same time all the time. In holy week we are invited to remember or notice our own darkness, but most of the time we're not all there at the same time. At this point, Peter is there by himself. He is going through this dark night of the soul without others there, but when he goes back to join his friends, I'm sure others will begin to encourage him. One may turn to friends for support.

That's what Jesus suggests. When you have returned, when you have moved through that moment of incredible darkness and recognize the love of God again, turn to others. Somebody else is going through their moment of darkness. We may not completely understand it. We may not be able to go to the same depth, but we can stand beside, we can support, we can encourage. We can help them see that there is a light on the other side of that dark night.

That's what the whole week is about, really. There is a light on the other side of that dark night. When we are on the other side, we have the opportunity to help one another. When we return, support one another.

Gracious God, it is incredible the whole story of Peter and how he feels so human. We see how much he struggles with some of the things you seem to call on him to do—to begin to see how you are working, to begin to recognize you don't always do things the same way as the world does. There are moments where we are invited to simply stay true to you, even when we're not sure exactly what's happening, and trust that you will guide us through to the other side. When we return to the light help us turn to one another. Let us be a body of Christ that supports and guides each other, encouraged by the one who went before, Jesus Christ. It is through him we pray. Amen.