

I. Intro.: Today in our worship we enter into the longest and darkest night of Jesus' life

A. Last two Sundays we've been preaching about the events of that Thursday in Holy Week

1. We've seen Jesus together with his disciples in several settings:
 - a) In the village of Bethany, then in Jerusalem in an upper room for the Passover celebration together,
 - b) and then back out of the city walls to Gethsemane, where last Sunday Cindy walked us through the prayer vigil Jesus kept, even when his disciples failed to watch and pray with him
2. So far, the story has largely been told as a single story of Jesus and his disciples together

B. But as Judas shows up and Jesus is arrested under cover of darkness amid the olive trees, **the incredible bond of togetherness these 13 men have experienced for the past three years is suddenly torn apart**

1. To be more precise, their unity just dissipates ...
 - a) reminds me of times in Egypt or Bolivia, cockroaches scurrying to corners when light is turned on
 - b) Judas has already changed sides, and the other 11 vanish into the night
2. At this point, the story is no longer about Jesus-and-his-disciples: the focus narrows down to being a story about Jesus ... Well, almost

C. This morning's Scripture is a two-for-one

1. Matthew the writer cleverly ties together two stories into one. In today's story, Jesus is on trial before the High Priest, but really ... it's Peter who's also on trial
2. About 3:00 in the morning almost 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem, two men, not just one, faced tests of their courage and their resolve
 - a) These two stories are interwoven into a single story
 - b) If you ever watch dramas like *CSI* on TV, or even stage productions like the musicals *Oklahoma!* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, you'll see much the same thing ...

there's never only one storyline going on, but there's usually two or three separate but related subplots going on at the same time, so we the viewers go back and forth watching different characters

In the same way, Matthew the storyteller takes us back and forth between these stories, focusing first on Jesus the popular rabbi and then on Peter, a common fisherman and one of the rabbi's disciples

II. Let's spend some time examining story more closely

A. Starts with what happens to Jesus after he's arrested in Gethsemane and his friends desert him

1. The mob that came out to arrest Jesus was not made up of Roman soldiers, but the Temple police that the Romans allowed to be responsible for security in and around the great Jewish Temple in Jerusalem

a) These policemen were responsible to the chief priests and scribes who controlled the Temple complex

b) That is why Judas had to identify Jesus with a kiss because, unlike the chief priests who knew a lot about Jesus, these hired policemen would not have recognized this notorious Nazarene rabbi named Jesus

2. After arresting him late at night, the Temple police took Jesus back inside the city walls ...

a) But not to the Temple complex where they were stationed

b) They took him to the residence of the High Priest

3. This was probably at orders of the high priest himself ... but it wasn't just Caiaphas who got out of bed for a late-night confrontation with Jesus

a) The high priest had summoned the Sanhedrin ... This was the Jewish supreme court that Rome allowed to have full power over religious matters

b) The Sanhedrin included some Pharisees, some experts in the Jewish law, and some wealthy local elites from whom the priests were chosen. 71 men sat on this council



(In a much less global way, you might find a few parallels between the Sanhedrin 2,000 years ago and the Conclave of Cardinals who will soon be meeting in the Vatican to choose a new pope)

c) Anyway, you can imagine that it was highly unusual for the Sanhedrin leaders to be called to meet in the middle of the night ... doubly so in the midst of the high Passover festival

d) In fact, as we will see, this was the first of many injustices imposed on Jesus, because

Sanhedrin was not allowed to meet at night ...

nor allowed to meet during any of the great Jewish feasts

B. Before going far in the story, Matthew's focus shifts briefly from inside Caiaphas' house to outside in the courtyard

1. This is where we find Peter ... oh yes, Peter ...

a) The one who named Jesus' true identity as Messiah when Jesus had asked his disciples "Who do *you* say that I am?"

b) This is the one who dared to walk on the sea when Jesus invited him

c) The one who just a few hours earlier said he would never deny Jesus

2. Although this is a tragic story, let's not be too hard on Peter

a) At this point in the story, unlike the other disciples, he hasn't completely abandoned Jesus, but follows along at a distance to see what will happen

b) This is a very dangerous thing to do, entering "the belly of the beast"

If your master has been arrested on orders of the high priest, the most powerful Jewish man in Jerusalem, why would you go to that man's house?

In a way, Peter is keeping his word to Jesus so far ... Although the other ten desert Jesus, Peter sticks with him, sort of ...

c) Once Peter realizes he can't risk going inside for a better view, he sees a fire going outside and quietly joins the group of servants warming themselves there

III. Here the saga continues

A. We cut back to the inside of high priest's house, where Jesus is having a rough go of it

1. Let's describe some of the "irregularities" of this first trial of Jesus

- a) Already mentioned that Sanhedrin meeting at night and during a Jewish holiday was illegal according to their own rules
- b) Those are just two of a list of injustices that made this proceeding less of a supreme court and more like a kangaroo court

First, this was an illegal location

(a) Sanhedrin was only authorized to meet in the Hall of Hewn Stone, within the Temple compound (see map above)

(b) Any Sanhedrin decisions made anywhere else would not have been valid

Second, there were Sanhedrin rules about a verdict

(c) Sanhedrin members had to individually speak their verdicts ... If the verdict was death, a night had to elapse before the verdict could be carried out ... to give the group time to think more carefully

(d) In Jesus' case, we have no record of separate verdicts from the 71 men, and the death sentence was carried out the very next morning

- c) What we have here is a gross mockery of justice ... Using language of children's time, this was *not fair!* ... big time not fair! ...

A governing group seemingly eager to break its own rules in order to get rid of Jesus

A word of caution is in order if you start to feel some anti-Semitic righteous indignation rising within you.

While it's tempting for us Christians to feel outraged at the Jewish authorities who perpetrated this injustice, we must be careful not to use these stories as justification for hatred and discrimination against Jewish people ... as has happened for centuries

2. Now returning to the trial, the frustrated high priest takes over the examination and he proceeds to violate yet another Sanhedrin rule

- a) In a Sanhedrin hearing, examiners were forbidden to ask leading questions ... Questions that if the accused answered directly, he would be condemning himself ... In our criminal justice system, we refer to this as protection from self-incrimination
- b) That's exactly what the high priest does, asking Jesus point blank, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?"

After keeping silent before, Jesus finally answers with a cryptic, "You have said so," which is an indirect "yes" answer

And then he adds a quotation from Daniel 7:13 that Jews considered a future reference to the Messiah coming in glory

With this, Jesus gives them all the ammunition they need to charge him with blasphemy and pronounce their verdict of death

3. There was only one hitch: Rome did not give the Jewish leaders the authority to carry out the death penalty themselves

- a) This verdict from the Sanhedrin did not guarantee Jesus' death, since they would have to convince the governor Pontius Pilate to carry it out
- b) But this was their official recommendation, arrived at in the middle of the night, away from a public place, so no one could protest against it

B. We have witnessed the so-called "trial" of Jesus, so Matthew takes us back outside to what was going on at same time

1. We gave Peter a little respect for even daring to be there at all, but soon Peter's resolve wavers

2. What we have here is a stark contrast between Peter's behavior under pressure, and Jesus' behavior ... a contrast in persistence and steadfastness:

- a) Jesus stayed true to who he was ... he did not cave in

stayed true to God's way of working in the world through unconditional nonviolent love even in the face of violence and terrible injustice

- b) Peter on the other hand waffled back and forth ... If Peter had been a political candidate in our world today, imagine what a heyday the media would have with all his flip-flopping!

First, he vows he'll never desert or deny Jesus, then he falls asleep in Gethsemane and later just runs away

Next he takes a big risk by following along to the high priests' residence, but then denies ever being with Jesus

After the first accusation, Peter has come under suspicion and you'd think he would get out of there, but he still stays around on the porch ... only to deny a second time that he's a follower of Jesus

Amazingly after this, he still doesn't try to flee but hangs around long enough to be accused a third time of association with Jesus

This time he denies even knowing Jesus ... he tries to convince the people of the truth of his lie by calling down curses on himself if he ever knew Jesus

3. And you know the rest:

- a) Immediately the rooster crows, Peter remembers Jesus' prediction, and a wave of despair crashes over Peter
- b) He probably doesn't even remember staggering out of the high priest's property onto the street because he's weeping so hard

C. Even while the power of Peter's failure is weighing heavy on us, Matthew completes this chapter of the story by returning us to the aftermath of the trial inside

- 1. At about 6:00 a.m. Sanhedrin has Jesus bound again, and they ship him off to Pilate, who was probably staying in the Antonia fortress on the other side of the city
- 2. They wanted to get Pilate's approval on their death sentence ASAP ... They had taken their process of "justice" as far as they could, even though the process they used was actually illegal
- 3. Day is dawning on Friday, and that's where we'll pick up the story next Sunday

IV. Now let's jump ahead 2,000 years and see how we might connect our story with Peter's

A. Three times Peter was given opportunity to link himself with Jesus, and three times he refused ... there were three slightly different questions/statements directed to Peter

B. How might we today answer my paraphrase of the three questions posed to Peter?

1. *Didn't I see you with Jesus?*

- a) Someone in today's world could be wondering a version of that same question about you or me
- b) It could be at various times when we're in presence of Jesus and other people at same time

Praying before meals or having personal devotional times

Attending church or a specifically Christian meeting

- c) Do we deny these activities in our lives ... minimize their importance ... fail to mention them as significant activities in our lives?

d) How would you answer the question, "Didn't I see you with Jesus?"

2. *You're one of Jesus' followers, aren't you?*

- a) As people first meet you and get to know you, they may wonder if you're a Christian

50 or 60 years ago, most people in America assumed that, especially in the rural Midwest, but not anymore.

(a) Today begins an elective Sunday school class with a book called *Reading the Bible After Christendom*

(b) U.S. is clearly moving to become a more secular society like Canada and especially Europe, where most people do not call themselves Christian, or even religious.

Do we ever play down our Christian faith? Can we find ways to not deny or apologize for our faith convictions while at the same time not force them at other people?

Today we have two new members joining the church, adding their "yes" answer to this question

That, too, is a contrast to the responses that Peter gave!

b) How would you answer today, if someone came up to you with the question, "You're one of Jesus' followers, aren't you?"

3. The third question is more of a statement or an observation than a question: *You **are** one of his followers ... I can tell by how you (talk, behave ...).*

- a) Something external about Peter gave him away as a Galilean ... in Matthew it was his speaking accent
- b) Is there anything about us that gives us away as Christians?

An outward nonconformity used to be a visible hallmark of Mennonites

(a) (***Not*** wearing certain kinds of clothes, ***not*** driving certain kinds of cars, ***not*** going to certain kinds of entertainment)

(b) The problem was that it was rigidly enforced and quite legalistic

(c) Most of us are glad to be free from that kind of expected nonconformity

But have we gone so far that a total stranger could be around us for a week and never know we are followers of Jesus?

c) What is God calling you to say or do this week that might cause someone to make this observation about you?

V. Conclusion

A. As we think re. how we answer these questions today, **let me close with a few brief verses supposedly written by this same Peter some 35 years after these two trials**

1. Turn if you wish to 1 Peter 2:21-25 and listen ...
2. Imagine what these words would mean coming from someone who was personally there when Jesus suffered ... someone who had strayed and yet was later able to return to the Good Shepherd

B. More personalized

1. Now hear these words again as if spoken directly to you personally ... Imagine them applying to you in the midst of whatever trials you are facing these days ... (adapted from NRSV)

For to this I have been called, because Christ also suffered for me, leaving me an example, so that I should follow in his steps.

*'He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'*

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore my sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, I might live for righteousness; by his wounds I have been healed. For I was going astray like a sheep, but now I have returned to the shepherd and guardian of my soul.

2. May it be so among us