

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:39-23:56

“At that moment, while Peter was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.”

There are so many powerful moments in the story of the Passion – the story of the suffering and death of Jesus that we just retold together. But one that always catches me, that wrenches my heart, is Peter’s story.

I think Peter was perhaps the most passionate of the twelve disciples. He once leapt out of a boat and walked on water in the middle of a storm because of the incredible conviction he had of who was Jesus was, and that with his help he could walk on water. Peter was the one, when Jesus asked “Who do you say that I am?” who answered, without even hesitating, “You are the Messiah.” Peter was part of Jesus’ closest circle, with James and John. He was present at the Transfiguration. He was so devoted to Jesus that he almost couldn’t bear to let Jesus wash his feet at the last supper.

And there he said to Jesus, “I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.”

But look how that has turned out now. Fear has changed Peter. Or perhaps it has revealed something in him that he had not known about himself. He follows Jesus, all the way to the courtyard of the high priest’s house. But then there is this series of little denials. Little statements that just deflect the attention of small, insignificant people away from Peter.

Nothing so grievous as an outright betrayal, right? Peter isn’t Judas. But then the cock crowed, and Jesus met Peter’s eyes. And Peter fled, weeping bitterly. He looks back on those three little denials, and they are everything. They deny who Jesus is to Peter; they deny who Peter is to himself. They deny Peter’s belief that he was the sort of man who would follow Jesus even to prison and to death.

I think this moment reveals to Peter, and to us, something very important about the nature of sin. Sin isn’t just the large, dramatic gestures of evil - like the betrayal of Judas, or an act of murder. Sin is in the small denial as well. It often can seem like such a little thing, and yet it’s not.

I think Peter weeps because he sees that what seemed so small wasn’t what he thought it was. Those little denials may have felt insignificant in the moment, and Peter may have thought that they were really about him and his own safety. But when Jesus meets his eyes and knows what Peter said, Peter understands that he has done harm. It is a betrayal. And it hurts his friend, and it hurts him.

Peter’s denials may still seem like a pretty clear example of wrongdoing to us, but I think this kind of sin occurs in our own lives a lot more than we often realize.

It is so easy to shut our eyes to the consequences of those small, sharp little jabs that we throw at friends, or family, or anyone we find ourselves able to be casually cruel to. Or we can get caught up in conversations about others that start out light and fun but shift, just a little, till we speak things we would never want them to know we had said.

And maybe they never do know. And maybe we set these kinds of moments out of our minds, but there is betrayal in them. And they're signs of that darkness that is hidden in each of us, that we are able to say and do things that hurt even people we love. Some of us are really aware of that darkness, and are deeply burdened by it. And some of us look away and may not even realize it about ourselves.

But the frightening thing about sin is how pervasive it is. How inescapable it is in us. These little denials of love we commit every day can seem so insignificant in the moment, but really these are patterns that are deeply insidious in all of our lives.

But once we are able to face that, recognize it honestly and even courageously, God starts to show us the way forward.

Walking through the events of Holy Week can teach us an infinite number of things. These sacred days – from Palm Sunday, to Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, on our way to Easter – change our lives every year that we make the time to observe them and to live that story that is our defining story.

And God's answer to sin is one of those deep, crucial lessons that we learn in Holy Week. Because watch what happens, as we walk with the crowds and with the disciples through the week:

We started just this morning with celebration and joy. With a procession and waving of palms! We are the joyful crowd in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. But only for a moment. How many minutes have passed before we are cast in a different role - a role we do not want. The role of the crowd in the Passion story. None of us want to have that line: "Crucify, crucify him!" And yet the Church, in Her wisdom, has assigned that role to all of us.

It's not pleasant. But it draws us into the mystery of the role we and all humanity plays in Jesus' passion and death. Somehow, each one of us is part of the reason Jesus went to the cross. We hope that we wouldn't have joined the crowd that day. We hope that we would have stood our ground against that hatred and violence. We hope that we would have recognized who Jesus was if we had met him, and accepted his teaching. Though we don't know if that would have been true for us.

But even though we weren't there, somehow we are part of it. When Jesus gave his life for the crowd that called for his blood, he didn't give it only for those people at that place and time. Somehow, he offered the living of his life, and the passion of his death for all of us.

Christians have spent the last 2,000 years trying to describe and explain and articulate how this is so. Why Jesus did this, and what it has done for us. And I think the best way we can make sense of it is to live these Holy Week events. To come and be in these liturgies, and live these moments of the story deeply, so that something inside us can understand what is so hard for our minds to fully grasp.

On Maundy Thursday, we experience what Jesus meant when he called us to be his friends, and called himself our friend. He will wash our feet. He will give us the gift of his life – his Body and Blood – which we receive as a gift again and again at each Eucharist. We will watch how hard it was even for the Son of God to face the darkness of death, which we all face. And we will try to stay awake and watch and pray with him in his vigil that night.

And then Friday will come. And with all his friends and disciples we will stand back and watch Jesus go to the Cross. And we will contemplate that Mystery, and ponder how we Christians have come to call that Friday, of all Fridays, "Good". And if we watch and pray we will glimpse the truth that it was love that drew Jesus to the cross.

And if we recognize that our sin had something to do with that – that each of our sin breached the relationship and friendship between us and God, and that Jesus' love healed the wound, by uniting humanity and God in himself in trust once more - then maybe we will see, off in the distance of Easter morning, the light that is coming.

The light of Mercy.

Mercy is the light that leads us out of the darkness of sin. God's infinite, loving mercy. His love - the same thing! It's vast beyond our comprehension. But we can hardly even grasp a sliver of it until we see how much we need it.

There's a reason that there is such a long and vast history in the Christian tradition of grave sinners coming to repentance and dramatic conversion. It's because I think they in some ways find it easier to see the depth of God's love because they recognize how far they are from deserving that and are overcome with how much God desires to shower them with it anyways.

I have been blessed to glimpse that at moments. For me the practice of sacramental confession has helped me feel something of God vast mercy and love. Because nothing strips away my rationalizations or makes me face the true seriousness of my casual sins like naming them aloud before another person.

And then that person, that priest, offers me forgiveness. Right in that moment after I most fully felt my own sin and unworthiness. And for me, at least, the voice of God offering me that mercy on the lips of the priest, speaking his love to me, has sometimes made me weep. I never had felt God's mercy like that before I made my first confession. I never had felt God's love like that.

And Holy Week can do that, too. These days change lives because the story of God's love changes lives. Today we watched Peter move from the exuberant joy of entering Jerusalem to the bitter tears of remorse he sheds outside the chief priest's house.

But we have to finish the story. We have to remember him following and praying and waiting. And then running to a tomb on a Sunday morning.

The story has begun for us again. God is calling to us to hear and live and follow it, and know his love once more.

Amen.