

3 LENT
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1ST MARSHALL
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PSALM 17:1-7; JOHN 18:12-27
Peter's Denial

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Peter is US – every man, every woman, every child. Peter is humanity at our **best** – Peter is humanity at our **worst** – **all**...at the very same time. In some ways he reminds me of that old Wide World of Sports trailer: *The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat*. Do you remember it? A video of one athlete, receiving an award, is followed by a video of a skier's horrible crash off a jump. *The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat*.

But here's the deal about Peter: **he** manages to stand at both ends of the spectrum...all at once!!



Today we'll focus on probably his most painful low, the night when he fulfills Jesus' prophecy that he would **deny** his Lord – not *once*, not *twice*, but **three** times in the very same night...the night in which Jesus was betrayed.

But before we get to that, let's briefly recap the *high-and-low-lights* – of the events that brought Peter to this point of crisis.

Last week Pr. Julie preached about an incident from early in Jesus' ministry (LK 5:1-11). Dog tired from fishing all night without a single bite, Peter's ready to call it quits when Jesus steps into his boat. A short time later the Lord tells him to go back out and drop his nets *one more time* – he **does**... and...they catch so many fish that their two boats start to sink!!

Then there's the story of Peter walking on water and, moments later...sinking like a **rock** (MT 14:2-33). [It's a little ironic that in the Greek language, **Peter** means **ROCK!!**] One night the disciples are caught by a wind as they're crossing the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly they see someone walk towards them **on the water** and they're afraid 'cause they think he's a **ghost**!

But when Jesus reveals himself, Peter says, *Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water!* *Have at it*, says Jesus, so Peter climbs out of the boat and starts walking on the waves... But **quickly** he gets distracted by the **wind**, gives in to **fear**, starts to sink, and cries out, *Lord, save me!*

There's also the time when Peter gets **praised** – and **rebuked** – by Jesus, again, all in the same story. When the Lord asks the disciples who they think he is, Peter confesses: *You're the Man!* *You're the Messiah!* *You're the son of the living God!* Yet when Jesus goes on to explain that the Messiah must suffer and be **killed**, Peter exclaims, *God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you!* Immediately Jesus rebukes **him** and says, *Get behind me, Satan!...you're setting your mind on human things, not on divine things!* (MT 16:13-23).

Then just before our story for today, Jesus is **arrested** in the Garden of Gethsemane. When the soldiers and temple police come to take him by force, **what does Peter do?** He **takes a stand**, **pulls out** his sword takes a swing at a guy and **cuts off** his ear – he's ready to **fight** to the **death** for Jesus...

...although a short time later we find Peter in the courtyard of the high priest, and the fight...has **gone out of him**. He's warming himself by a fire, standing with *those* people who, just a short time ago, he was ready to **kill**... But **now** he has no sword, he's **lost** his bravado, he's **empty** of everything...except disillusionment, disappointment...and despair.

What do all these scenarios tell us about Peter? He can be:

-peaceful...and angry -trusting...and doubting -loyal...and fearful
-insightful...and clueless -faithful...and denying...

Peter is...**us** – the best and worst of humanity all at the same time...

This episode in the high priest's courtyard paints an amazing contrast between Jesus and Peter. It's a heart-wrenching and poignant scene that could not be more dramatic:

Jesus...is *tyed up* with ropes, but **fearless**, and *speaks* the truth freely.

Peter...is free to *move around*, but **bound-up** by fear, and can only lie.

Three times **Jesus** stands with his accusers, facing death, and says, ***I AM*** ...
(vs. 5, 6, 8)



Three times **Peter** stands with his accusers, fearing death, and says, *I am not!*
(vs.17, 25, 27)

Immediately after his third denial of Jesus, the rooster crows...exactly as the Lord had predicted...

Imagine yourself as Peter in this moment...and **think** about these questions:

- What would you feel the moment that rooster crowed?
- How does it feel when you fail a friend, a family member, a cause?

Now **here's** a question I *want* you to **answer**: **What would make Peter do that, (what would make you and me) deny a friend, a family member, a cause?**

Fear...of being killed, certainly... the fear of being arrested...

The theologian David Lose says this: *Fear is a debilitating thing. It can make you forgo previous commitments, break promises, take the easy way forward, choose what you know is wrong in order to avoid ridicule or danger, and threaten to overwhelm you so that you forget even who you are. And sometimes, (fear) can urge you to choose the comfort of a warm fire and the convenience of a small lie rather than stand for the truth you confessed.*

[-http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/john-1817-18/](http://www.davidlose.net/2015/02/john-1817-18/)

The temptation to **lie** as a way to **get out** of a sticky situation is **always** on our menu of options. It's not a very **good** one, and certainly not a **healthy** one – but...when we *feel cornered*, when we *stand accused*, when our fight-or-flight response *kicks in* and we're **out** of options...it's amazing how **tempting** it is to grab hold of a **lie** as our *life line*...especially knowing **full well** that such a lie is **only** going to make it **worse** in the **end**.

Yet it's something we learn to do at a very early age: how to lie as an escape route. Some of you have heard this story before. As a 4-yr-old, our son, Mark, learned how to make the first letter of his name... One day he got hold of a big, black permanent marker and put an M on everything he could reach in the garage: the washer, the dryer, the water heater, the lawn mower, boxes, containers – everything in there from that day on sported a big, black M.

A few days later, he and his little sister were in the driveway playing by our brand-new Subaru. Carolyn walked over to see what they were doing and discovered that “someone” had scratched a nice big M on the side of the car... Carolyn said, *MARK FULLER!!* And without a second's hesitation, he looked at his 3 year old sister and said, *Rachel did it!!*

Fear of being found out, exposed, put out, put to shame, put to death – it's universal. Fear can make us do stupid and self-destructive things... Fear can make us lie about our loved ones, abandon our friends, even renounce our faith...

And I suspect that this is one of the reasons why this story of Peter's denial is one of the very few that's found in all four gospels – and whose details are virtually identical in each.

Some scholars believe that John's gospel was written during a time when Christians were being persecuted. And as it always happens in those terrible moments, there were those who chose to deny their faith rather than suffer the threat of pain – or death...

Well, after some time had passed, the persecutions came to an end, and another problem arose: *What does the faith community do with those who renounced their faith out of fear, yet now want to be accepted back into the fold...?*

The story of Peter gives us a wonderful blue-print for how to learn to live as forgiven sinners. The final chapter of John's gospel is a beautiful counter-balance to the story of Peter's denial.

After Jesus' resurrection, the women, Peter and the other disciples have seen the risen Lord – he's popping in and out of his followers' lives. Appearing to some here one day, he appears to a few over there the next...

...And, though they're very happy that Jesus is alive, I'm guessing that they're also still a little on edge – as we always are, when significant change occurs and we have to work to define a new normal.

And sometimes, in the midst of those tense days, we just have to do something that's feels familiar, something we're sure of, something we know... which is exactly what the disciples do. Chapter 21, verse 3 tells us Simon Peter says to (the disciples), *I am going fishing!!*

What problem can't be made better by taking some time off to wet a line, right? Well, they all jumped up and said, *We will go with you!!*

Do you remember how the story goes? They fish all night and...catch nothing...sound familiar?? Just after dawn, someone on the shore calls out to them, *Children, you don't have any fish, do you?* They can't tell who it is, but they reply in unison, **No!**

So the man tells them to throw the net on the other side of the boat...which they do...and...**what happens?** They catch so many fish they can't even haul the net back into the boat... And then they remember another time when something very similar happened, and their eyes are opened, and they see that it's Jesus.

When the disciples finally get to shore, he invites them to sit down for breakfast. He takes bread, and gives it to them, as well as some fish – and their suspicions are confirmed – it is, indeed, the Lord.



After breakfast, Jesus turns to Peter and says, *Simon, son of John, do you love me?* He replies, *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.* And Jesus says, *Feed my lambs.*

A second time the Lord says, *Simon, son of John, do you love me?* He replies, *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.* And Jesus says, *Tend my sheep.*

A third time the Lord says, *Simon, son of John, do you love me?* We're told that Peter is hurt by this and says, *Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.* And Jesus says, *Feed my sheep.*

It's almost as if Jesus is walking Peter back through his three-fold denial on that cold, dark evening in the courtyard of the high priest. And here on the shore in the dawn of a new day, it seems that each time Peter professes his love for Jesus, another of his denials is cancelled, erased, forgiven...

This is good news...this is the very best news for people like you and me, people who, like Peter, are at one and the same time sinner-and-saint, denier-and-confessor, one who lies and one who tells the truth. For in the end, we discover that we have a God who's dying to forgive us, who's eager to hear of our love, and who is convinced that we – even we – you and me – are worthy to feed his sheep with the good news of Jesus Christ – for all!

Amen.