

Midweek 3 - February 28, 2024

Matthew 26:57-75 - Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled.⁵⁸ But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.⁵⁹ The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death.⁶⁰ But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward⁶¹ and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" ⁶² Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." ⁶⁴ "You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy." ⁶⁶ What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. ⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?" ⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. ⁷¹ Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" ⁷³ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." ⁷⁴ Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Dear witnesses of Jesus:

A man from Galilee stands in Jerusalem surrounded by a hostile crowd. They set upon him, questioning who he is. They accuse him. They put him on trial. What will he say? While that's happening in the courtyard outside the high priest's house, a very similar scene is playing out inside. Peter and Jesus—the contrast is clear. As the gospel writer Matthew sets these scenes side by side for us tonight, these two men lead us to consider our testimony when the world puts us on trial.

Let's start with the man inside. The teacher from Galilee knew this moment was coming. It was on his mind as he prayed in Gethsemane a few hours earlier. He saw it drawing near when he willingly went with the mob that arrested him. It was ordained from before time began that God would stand on trial before the Sanhedrin in the wee hours of that Friday morning.

Trial is a generous term. *Kangaroo court* is more like it. A parade of liars all take turns on the stand but can't get the story straight. The only accusation with any merit is something Jesus actually said, a promise of his resurrection on the third day that the liars didn't understand. Jesus refuses to be drawn into the foolishness; he will not dignify their lies with a response. But he will not fail to confess who he is. When the high priest puts him under oath and asks if he is the Son of God, he stands firm and calmly and confidently confesses the truth, "I am!"

Now to the man outside. The fisherman from Galilee had been warned that this moment would come. Jesus had predicted it earlier that evening, but Peter brushed the warning aside. The pressure starts with a servant girl: "You were with Jesus too." "No," he says and tries to sneak away. Then another servant girl says the same, and other bystanders join in. "Sure, you're one of his. Your accent gives it away." Peter puts *himself* under oath and calls down curses, "I am not!"

What was Peter afraid of? Let's be fair. We could exaggerate and contrast Jesus boldly confessing before powerful, violent men with Peter melting at a servant girl's question. But Matthew tells us that guards were sitting in the courtyard too (Matthew 26:58). Every voice accusing Peter raised the risk that the guards would notice and arrest him, just like they had arrested Jesus. That's not nothing. Still, Peter's denial outside the courtroom was false testimony just as wicked as the lies of the witnesses inside.

What are you afraid of? I think you know how it feels to be surrounded by hostile voices. To feel cornered by a question about your connection to Jesus. Perhaps you feel that when you're with your friends and they ask why you don't do what they do, what everyone else does, and you try hard to find excuses they'll accept. You feel that when people at work start talking about others behind their backs and instead of standing up for them, you look for your chance to slip away. Or when someone you know asks why you believe what you believe and your first thought is to change the subject as fast as you can.

What are you afraid of? Being considered weird? Losing street cred? Getting laughed at? Certainly not being arrested for your faith, at least not in this country today! We melt under far less pressure than what Peter felt. But let's be fair: The pressure is

still real. The fear of losing a friendship, being singled out, being looked down on—those are real fears of real loss. I'm not asking what you're afraid of as if to say, "Toughen up. It's not so bad." Being associated with Jesus can bring real pain. But not being associated with Jesus . . . wouldn't that be worse? What's scarier: the thought of suffering with Jesus now or the thought of suffering apart from him for eternity? In a moment of pressure, we might think we're better off not being counted as disciples of Jesus. That certainly won't be the case when he comes in glory on the clouds!

I wish I could have seen Jesus' face. Matthew doesn't record this detail, but the historian Luke does: When the rooster crowed, "*the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter*" (Luke 22:61). What was on his face? Disappointment? Sadness? Blood and spit? Love that Peter knew he didn't deserve? Whatever it was, it prompted Peter to run away and weep.

I can imagine the face. I've seen one like it on my parents and teachers when I buckled under pressure and did what I knew was wrong, something I had been warned about. I've imagined it on my Savior those many times I tried my hardest to distance myself from him because in the moment, it wasn't convenient to be considered his disciple. Like Peter, I too have every reason to weep.

But let's not run away from that face. Jesus would have you stay and look. Whatever is on that face, it is calling you back to him. Even when you fail to claim Jesus, he still wants to claim you. He shows you his bruises and blood not to shame you but to reveal how much he loves you. What abuse he absorbs for you! This is the Son of God, who answers to no one yet stands trial and suffers to save you.

Stay and look . . . and listen. Listen to Jesus' testimony about himself. He says he is the Messiah. He is God's Anointed One, the one chosen to take your place. You have been connected to him through Baptism, which means that what he does before the high priest counts for you. For all the times you've kept silent or tried to sneak away, he stands and confesses as though he were you. That man is your perfect self!

Keep listening. Just hours away from the depths of his humiliation, Jesus quotes Daniel's prophecy about the Messiah's glory, the demonstration of glory that was five hundred years closer than when first prophesied—and today is two thousand years closer still. Jesus' words were true. The one who was battered and bloodied now sits at the right hand of the almighty God. The one who once stood on trial before sinners will come on the clouds as judge, condemning those who stood against him and rescuing the faithful who, purely by his power and grace, stand with him.

That too is what I mean when I say, "What are you afraid of?" Should we be afraid to say, "That King of kings—yes, I'm with him"? How could we be embarrassed to admit that we love the one who loved us and suffered and died to make us his? Do we have anything to fear if that one is now ruling over all things and promises to come back with justice to make all things right for us?

Maybe part of the challenge is that we get caught off guard: We're just going about our business and suddenly we're thrust into the witness stand. But we shouldn't be surprised. Just as Jesus warned Peter, he also warns us: We will face tough questions. We'll be put on trial in the court of public opinion. We'll be singled out for our connection to Jesus. And that's a good thing! Consider it a gift to be associated with Jesus like that.

And consider it an opportunity. Peter learned this lesson. The Lord's look called him to repentance. After Jesus rose from the dead, he restored Peter and called him to feed his sheep. Years later, Peter wrote a letter to some of those sheep. They were Christians who stood out from the society around them—citizens who honored their government, slaves who obeyed their masters, wives who submitted to their husbands, husbands who were considerate of their wives, believers who were willing to suffer for doing good. People would ask them, "What makes you different?" And Peter encouraged them to be ready to give a reason for their hope in Jesus.

Friends, I hope your Christian accent gives you away! I hope people notice that we disciples of Jesus speak and act differently—like him. May we be so blessed as to have people accuse us of being with Jesus! Sometimes that will mean hardship, but I can think of no higher honor. Often it will mean the chance to point others to that same loving face; to tell them about that man from Galilee, the Son of God and Son of Man, the Messiah, who came for us and will come again. That's our testimony! Amen.