

16 March 2016
Lent 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Little (or BIG!) Peter in Each of Us: Denial”

Text: Luke 22:54-62; 2 Timothy 2:8-13

The first rule about trying to get out of a hole is to stop digging. But Peter doesn't stop. Or can't. From pride to complacency to misunderstanding to keeping his distance, tonight, perhaps we could say, he hits rock bottom. He denies his Lord not once, not twice, but three times.

It had been just a few hours really, from the time this all started. Peter had heard things he never thought he would hear. He had seen things he never thought he would see. He was tired, he was worried, he was confused, he was afraid. And he had never felt so alone . . . even though he was surrounded by people. All he could feel was evil pressing in on him and choking him.

So here he was, behind enemy lines, so to speak. He was lost in the thousand thoughts that filled his mind. He wondered where Jesus was, what was happening to him at this moment . . . when all of a sudden, it seemed like every one was looking at him, just like all those eyes had looked at he and Jesus in the Garden. The light from the fire whose warmth he welcomed was betraying him, exposing him. And then a servant girl said: ***This man also was with him.*** Peter felt a chill run down his spine and all the blood run out of his face, and then he blurted out: ***Woman, I do not know him.*** And while he immediately regretted saying it, at the same time he felt relief that his answer seemed to have satisfied his accusers.

He put his head down as it got a little colder. Not that much time had passed, but enough to begin thinking that maybe the danger had passed . . . when it happened again: ***You also are one of them. Man, I am not.*** He said it a little louder this time; a little more defiantly. His hand felt the hard steel of his sword still under his cloak, that still had the blood of the high priest's servant on it. It wasn't much, but it was ready, if he needed it.

Another hour went by . . . What are they doing with Jesus? Why is it taking so long? The first hints of sunrise were beginning to appear - what would this day bring? What it brought was the third accusation against him: ***Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean.*** Peter's nerves, so raw, almost couldn't take it anymore. ***Man, I do not know what you are talking . . .*** and then he heard it - the rooster . . . ***about.*** And at that moment, all his fears were engulfed in a flood of shame and despair. He looked up and saw Jesus - still bound, still surrounded by soldiers. And worse: Jesus saw him. And that voice, softer and milder than any of his accusers, cut deeper than any of their words

did . . . *Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.* And the tears began. And they wouldn't stop for quite some time.

And the hole he had dug himself into suddenly felt like a grave.

The sin that lives in Peter is the same sin that lives in us. Sin that makes us timid and fearful of making a bold confession. Sin that makes us do what we know we should not, and makes us not do what we know we should. Sin that makes us not want to be labeled one of "them." Sin that makes us fear men more than God, that makes us fear death and life, ridicule and judgment. The sin that seems to engulf us and makes us say *no* to Jesus . . . our friend, our Lord, our Saviour. For who among us cannot say that we have never denied our Saviour? Either in our thoughts or desires, our words or our deeds.

At that moment, Peter felt that he had died. *Good!* For that is the first step for resurrection. You must first die. Die to yourself, die to your goodness, die to your faithfulness, die to what you are able to do, die . . . and be raised by Christ. For the one who rose from the dead for you first died for you, for all your sin, all your shame, all your failures, for all your pride and complacency and misunderstanding and distance, and even your denials - that on Him and not on you, He pay for them and you be forgiven. That He die with you, so that you rise with Him to a new and better life.

There was probably a rooster crowing that morning as well - that Sunday morning when the women came and told Peter that Jesus' tomb was empty. And by that evening, Peter's empty heart would be filled with life again.

But from that day forward, I wonder . . . could Peter ever again hear a rooster crow and not think about these things? Not think about that awful night or that wonderful resurrection morning? What a blessing, then, for Peter. Every morning being called to repentance, and every morning rejoicing in the forgiveness of Jesus.

Luther got that, I think, for he spoke of baptism that way. That every morning when we awake, make the sign of the cross and remember that you are baptized. Repent, drown your sin, and die, and then rise with Christ and His forgiveness to new life again. Every morning, repent of the sin, but don't dwell on it; don't give *it* new life! Live in Christ as He now lives in you.

That's what Paul was talking about as he wrote to Timothy and said:

*The saying is trustworthy, for:
If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—*

for he cannot deny himself.

He cannot deny Himself. To deny those joined to Him by faith would be to deny Himself. And that will never be. *If we die with Him, we will live with Him.*

And those times when our faith is rocked, when fears shake us, when we fall and fall hard, when the Peter in us takes over - *if we are faithless, he remains faithful.* He will not leave us or forsake us. His promises, once given, and never reneged. There is forgiveness for you, in Him.

There is only one exception, Paul says: *those who deny Him.* Meaning not those who fall in weakness, like Peter and you and me, but those who continually deny Him and deny Him on the Last Day. Those who want no part of Christ will get what they want . . . for eternity.

But until then, ***the Word of God is not bound!*** And yes, in a two-fold sense. First, the Word of God is proclaimed in all the world, to sound the rooster crow to call us to repentance and to faith in our risen Saviour. And second, our Saviour, the Word of God made flesh is no longer bound by the cords of death and the grave, but alive and still forgiving sinners. Alive and praying for you. Alive and preparing a place for you, to live with Him, forever. Alive for Peter, for you, and for me!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.