

I AM (not)

Lent 3 (3/8/26)

John 18:12-27

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

We are entering into a hard stretch of stories. For the next 3 Sundays as we approach Easter, our Lectionary gives us 3 Good Friday stories from John's gospel. I think you will see that the themes they raise make them worth our attention on more than just Good Friday.

Today, we'll read the story of the disciple Peter denying that he even knows Jesus. But let's set the stage.

Last week, our youth were brilliant, showing us Jesus, bent at the feet of the disciples, washing the crap off their feet and saying, "*this* is what it looks like for you to love someone." When finishes washing them, they share a Last Supper together. Jesus says to them "if you continue to love and serve, you will be connected to the endless life of God."

But this dinner, beautiful as some of it is, is cast in shadows. One of Jesus' friends sits at the table intending to betray him. Judas has sold out Jesus for a bag of cash.

But Judas is not the only disciple who turns on Jesus. In fact, they all do (except, maybe, for some of the women, but that's another sermon for another day). Aside from Judas, the one disciple who's denial of Jesus is made plain by the gospels is Peter.

Let's talk about Peter. Who is he? Named Simon, he is one of Jesus' very first followers. Simon and his brother Andrew are fisherman by the Sea of Galilee when Jesus meets them. Jesus gives Simon a new name: the Aramaic name Cephas, which means "the rock"; in Greek, "Peter." Simon Peter comes to have a kind of authority among the disciples, a place of privilege among this group of equals. Peter will be there at the tomb—one of, if not the first to see the Resurrected Christ. Peter will go on to lead the church in Antioch and the church in Rome; he is the one through whom our Roman Catholic friends trace the authority of the pope. But Peter's authority is curious. In the early church, tries to straddle an awkward divide between the "bring 'em all in" renegade Paul and the traditionalist James in Jerusalem. Peter is caught in between.

The Peter we meet in the gospels doesn't seem to know who he is, either. He is with Jesus, at the beginning when Andrew tells him, "we have found the Messiah." Peter follows. In chapter 6 of John, when Jesus asks if "the twelve" want to go away, it is Peter who answers for them all, saying "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. You are the Holy One of God" (6:67–69). Peter appears to see. But does he know? Does he trust?

At the Table, at the Last Supper as Jesus is teaching his friends about love and about suffering, Jesus shocks them all by stooping to wash their feet, to show them the kind of love he wants them to model. It's Peter who is the most incredulous. "You can't do this!," he

shouts. And when Jesus says he must, Peter blurts out, “don’t just wash my feet, wash all of me!” You feel Peter’s own self-doubt as he swerves between extremes. Jesus warns them, “I must soon go away.”

Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus says, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.”³⁷ Peter said, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”³⁸ Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? ...Before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

Jesus sees Peter. All of him. Then, while they are still at the Table, something subtle happens. You need to see it. Jesus says, “Someone at this table will betray me.” This is no surprise; we already know that it will be Judas. But who is the first to jump up and demand to know who it is? It’s Simon Peter. Simon Peter wants to know. Jesus whispers the identity of his betrayer—but only to the Beloved Disciple. Peter doesn’t hear. He is left wondering.

They all leave the Table. The betrayal goes into motion. Soldiers move in to arrest Jesus in the garden. John says that Peter leaps up, grabs his knife, slashes murderously at these “enemies,” cutting off the ear of one. Jesus rebukes Peter, “Put your sword back. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” Jesus just washed his betrayer’s feet. When Peter is faced with betrayal, something unholy and violent is unleashed in his spirit. Peter has listened to everything and has understood nothing.

That brings us to today’s story from John 18. Jesus is under arrest, being dragged to the high priest to face accusation. This is how John describes what happens next:

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus [to home of Annas, father-in-law of the high priest]. [T]hat disciple... went in with Jesus..., ¹⁶ but Peter was standing outside at the gate. [The] disciple... went out... and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ The woman guarding the gate said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” ¹⁸ Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

¹⁹ Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered, “I have spoken openly to the world.... I have said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” ²² When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” ²³ Jesus answered, “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” ²⁴ Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, “You are not also one of his disciples, are you?” Peter denied it and said, “I am not.” ²⁶ One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

One of the best things about John’s gospel is how he shows the followers of Jesus as works in progress. The other gospel writers are often just mean, talking about the disciples like they’re a bunch of dimwits who can’t possibly grasp Jesus’ subtleties. In John, the people around Jesus do often “get him.” But they always get him only in part. Nicodemus is fascinated by Jesus, but can’t really understand him. The woman at the well wants the

living water, but she also only gets him in part. Mary and Martha, grasp who Jesus is more fully than most anyone, but they, too, are shown to us as works-in-progress, growing in faith as the story goes along. Even Mary Magdalene, on Easter, still only gets him in part. And then there's the famous Doubting Thomas, standing face to face with a man who 3 days before was dead and asking for proof in the marks of the nail holes in Jesus' hands.

Why is this important?

These people are real. That's what faith in Jesus is like. You can see yourself in them. I do. I've spent years thinking about Jesus a lot and talking about Jesus a lot and following Jesus, but my own house of faith doesn't look like some grand edifice of propositional truths stacked on each other to make a castle. I don't have a systematic theology. My house of faith looks more like I grabbed a couple of branches off a tree to make a lean-to. At the first strong wind, I'm back to nothing. At the first rain storm, I'm soaked.

Peter is just like you. He's not a rock. He's impulsive. He's defensive. He blusters his way through. He makes promises he doesn't keep. He's got lots of good qualities. He loves Jesus. But when it matters, he's like, "I don't know him."

Does Peter disappoint you? Do you ever disappoint yourself? We don't linger much on sin in the progressive part of the Christian church. There's good reason. Sin has been used to shame and control and exploit people and ruin people. My mentor at Marble Collegiate Church, Arthur Caliendo, took out the confession of sin from the liturgy. I asked him why. He said, "David, people already know that they are broken. They are reminded all of the time." He felt like the confession dragged us through a mud that never quite came clean, even after the assurance of grace.

We leave explicit reminders of sin out of our liturgy. But you and I cannot leave it out of our faith life. Sin is in our bodies. It's in our politics as we unsheath our swords and drop our bombs. Sin is in our economy. Sin is in our history. Our gender. Our race. Our class. Our dreams. Our decisions. Our actions.

We are just like Peter. Sometimes we get it. We are the first to sign up for Hagar's House. We lower our carbon footprint. We vote for the woman and not the madman. We are elders and pastors and leaders. But in the very next moment, when someone needs us, we are the ones looking the other way. We doubt we have enough to be truly generous.... We downplay our complicity in structural evil. We tell ourselves we're not bad. We've heard everything that Jesus said; we want to follow. We say to ourselves, "mine are only small betrayals. I'm not Trump. I'm not Judas."

We warm ourselves around the small fires of worldly comfort, mumbling "I am not."

This is not the last word of Peter's story. Or ours. We will see Peter again, see ourselves again, on the other side of the Resurrection.

But let there be no illusion: we are flawed, confused, scared, capable of betraying what matters most. We need the presence of the one who said—who is—"I AM."