

Peter's Denial

Last week we talked about Jesus' farewell to his disciples. In his farewell discourse, he comforted them, tried to reassure them, and assured them that their belief in him was not misguided...their trust was not in vain.

Now, all those words will get sorely tested.

This is a formidable scene. After Jesus' farewell discourse, he and all the disciples...minus Judas...head to one of their favorite spots. A garden...a place where they've relaxed together...a place where they've prayed together...laughed and cried together. We know it was an intimate spot for Jesus and his disciples because Judas knew exactly where to find them.

The disciples were probably still pretty confused, sad, and scared. Jesus was maybe praying. A mass of people, lanterns and torches bobbing in the dark, cross the narrow Kidron valley and approach the garden. Jesus and his disciples hear their approach.

Jesus knows what's about to happen. He stands between the mob and his disciples, a gatekeeper defending his flock. He said, if you are looking for me, let these men go.

Peter drew his sword, slipped past Jesus, and cut off the ear of a slave, Malchus. In John's account, there's no healing, but Jesus tells Peter to knock it off. "Am I not to do what the Father has called me to do?"

So Jesus was bound and taken to the court of the High Priest.

Let's back up for a minute and get some perspective on this. So Jesus is there with his disciples. A small band. Jesus isn't armed. The band in general isn't heavily armed.

Yet, a detachment...a cohort...of Roman soldiers comes to arrest him. That's 600 soldiers. But that's not all. The Temple police show up too. We're not told how many police there are, but regardless, hundreds of armed men show up to arrest Jesus.

That's a lot of power coming against a traveling rabbi whose only real act of rebellion was the ruckus at the Temple, overturning tables and driving out the merchants.

Why? I mean we can get the Temple police. We have listened to Jesus all the way through John's gospel call God father. He repeatedly says he has come from the Father...he and the

Father are one...if you've seen me you've seen the father. And the most damning...his I AM statements, equating himself with God.

So you can maybe see that the religious establishment might object to someone claiming to be God or from God. Except they were waiting for just such a person – one sent from God.

They just didn't buy that Jesus was it. Why not? And honestly, arrest and crucifixion seemed like a lot for someone who claimed to be God – I mean, you could pretty easily marginalize someone like that – say they're a little off. Except that his following was sizeable.

And why was Rome anxious enough to get rid of him. In some ways, John's gospel is far less political than the other three gospels. And really, you'd think for the government to want to arrest him and ultimately kill him they'd have to have a little stronger case against him.

It's not that there's none. But the kingdom of God, the most political entity in the gospels, is only mentioned twice in John's gospel compared to 30 some times in Matthew and Luke and nearly 20 in Mark.

Honestly, when I sort of looked back through John's gospel, I think if that was the only gospel we had, it might actually be kind of hard to see why Jesus ever got arrested let alone crucified.

But as I thought about that, I remember how big John is in symbolism and signs. So let's think about this concept of the World in John. The world is simultaneously what God so love that God sent Jesus, but the world is also that which opposes Jesus.

This cohort of soldiers and mob of Temple police represent all of that world of opposition – the powers that be both in the empire and in the religious establishment.

I started to wonder if maybe it wasn't that the religious establishment didn't believe that Jesus was who he said he was. Instead, what if they suspected he might be, but they just didn't like the sort of Messiah he turned out to be.

Jesus asked really one main thing of his disciples – that they love and serve. But the religious establishment couldn't have that. And neither could Rome. A world based on love and service? How can anybody get ahead in that kind of scheme? How can you rule the world with love instead of an iron fist backed by armies and firepower?

Caiaphas knew that Jesus and his world was at odds with the power of Rome. Here's what he said after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead:

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had

done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place^[h] and our nation.” ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” ⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. ⁵³ So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Caiaphas knew the stakes. He had condemned Jesus long before this scene in his courtyard.

That brings us to Peter. Peter is caught in this same trap between two worlds...two ways of being. As the scene unfolds, Jesus stands firm.

Peter does not. He's afraid of that world whose massive power came to the garden against Jesus. Peter may have believed what Jesus said about himself. But when it got scary, he was not able to stand up to that world that opposed Jesus. He was not able to stand up to the crushing power of the religious establishment and the empire.

Notice that in John's gospel, Peter doesn't deny knowing Jesus. But he does deny being his disciple. He denies the sort of relationship with Jesus that Jesus meant when he used the word belief.

Well, that brings us to...us. The story of Peter's denial makes us confront some difficult questions for ourselves.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for us in the 21st Century is not do we believe Jesus is God. Belief in our time and place is too often more of an intellectual exercise. It's pretty low risk. And arguing with non-believers about the existence of God or whether Jesus was God in a mostly fruitless exercise.

I think the real challenge to us is to go back to what Jesus meant by belief. Belief is a relationship. It's being in a relationship with the triune God through Jesus and the Spirit. And that relationship then shapes everything about us. It shapes our witness to Jesus. It shapes our actions. It shapes our worship and our prayer. It's at the heart of everything about who we are and what we do.

I believe that witnessing to a belief that Jesus reveals a God of all-encompassing love is still unpopular. It will still rankle those in power, whether it's in the political and government establishment or the religious establishment.

If you don't believe that, pay attention to the ongoing reaction of people in power when someone says loving people of color or queer people or poor people is not only what Jesus calls us to, but that love will take some very uncomfortable action to put into practice.

Jesus and Peter faced their accusers at the same time. Back and forth the scene goes. Jesus repeatedly stands firm in his conviction of who he is. Peter caves.

We still stand as witnesses, like Peter. We stand as witnesses to people who claim to be religious, but then belittle and demean some of God's most vulnerable people. We stand as witnesses to a God of self-giving love.

And as always, we know we will sometimes fail...maybe often fail. So did Jesus' disciples. But he went to the cross for them...and us...anyway. After the resurrection, the disciples did find their strength. In a couple of weeks we'll hear how Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into them to enable them to find that strength and courage to witness.

And we will be reminded that that Spirit is patient and forgiving...but won't let up on pushing us to witness to a God of all-encompassing love.