

“The Whole Picture”
March 1, 2020

Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

This morning marks the first Sunday in Lent, a forty day season of the church year that will carry us all the way to Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. According to Christian tradition, Lent is a time for reflection and self-examination. Lent is a time for Christians to turn and return to God, asking forgiveness for the ways in which we have sinned and finding reconciliation through the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Lent is also a time of year when the Gospels offer us fascinating stories of the people whom Jesus encountered near the end of his life. As Jesus was making his way toward Jerusalem, where Jesus faced opposition and trial from crowds and rulers alike, and even on his way to the hill called “Golgotha” where he would be crucified on a cross, Jesus interacted with a number of intriguing people who help give texture and meaning to his final days.

Excluding Youth Sunday on March 15th, it’s my intention to explore more deeply a few of those Gospel characters during this Lenten season. There are more colorful characters in the final Gospel stories than there are Sundays during Lent, so I have to pick and choose a bit. Some of the people I will be preaching about are well known and some are fairly obscure. But each person in their own way contributes to making this season the holiest in the church year. And together they help set the stage for the foundational Christian triumph which is Easter.

I start the Lenten sermon series this morning with Peter, one of the most familiar Gospel figures. Peter is also, as it turns out, one of the most controversial figures in the Gospel and arguably one of the most lovable figures in the end. You probably wouldn’t know all that, however, by listening to this morning’s two part Scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew.

If I was a director or a cameraman attempting to film today’s stories involving Peter, the opening frame would be a shot of Jesus sharing a final meal with his disciples. While the disciples sit around the table on that long ago night, the focal point of the scene would be Jesus as he breaks the bread and blesses the cup. Together, Jesus and his friends sing a hymn and then they head off to the Mount of Olives.

Only when they arrive at the Mount of Olives does Jesus drop the bombshell. After a night where Jesus and his friends have had dinner and given thanks to God in word and song, Jesus informs the disciples that every single one of them will desert him.

All of the disciples were incredulous, taking Jesus’ prediction as a personal affront. But Peter was the one who spoke up...the way he so often did. Boldly and

confidently, Peter assured Jesus he was wrong. “Certainly I will not desert you,” Peter proclaimed. And all the other disciples nodded vigorously in agreement.

Yet Jesus looked Peter right in the eye and refused to let Peter look away. With the kind of steely gaze that must have disarmed at least a little of Peter’s swagger, Jesus singled out Peter with a shameful prognostication. “My friend, before the cock crows this night, you will deny me three times.”

Fast forward to the second part of this morning’s Scripture lesson and what was a single shot of the Last Supper has now become a split screen. Jesus has been arrested by a band of Roman soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane and he stands in the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, accused of blasphemy as a result of his claim to be the Son of God. Meanwhile, Peter lingers outside in the courtyard, trying to comprehend this unnerving turn of events.

While he mills around, a servant girl runs into Peter and declares she recognizes him. Followed by another servant girl. And finally a group of bystanders. All of them know who Peter is because they have seen him in the company of Jesus. But three times in a row, Peter shrugs his shoulders and claims anonymity. Until Peter hears the cock crow and confronts the devastating realization that Jesus was right.

The camera now zeroes in on Peter’s face. What was an expression of brash confidence at the Last Supper morphs into fear and anxiety as three people in a row sought to “out” Peter as a Jesus follower. And when the rooster stops crowing, Scripture tells us Peter went out and “wept bitterly.”

Have you ever watched someone weep bitterly? Like the spouse who has been devoted and committed to a marriage for years, working hard and investing body, mind, and spirit into fulfilling marriage vows and growing as a couple. Only to hear that their husband or wife has been unfaithful. He or she weeps bitter tears.

Or the employee who has been loyal and responsible to a company for years, always working extra hours and getting high praise on performance reviews. Only to be passed over for a long awaited promotion by the new hotshot who has been part of the company for just a brief time. He or she weeps bitter tears.

Or the parent who learns their child has died of an overdose in spite of all the heart to heart talks and the treatment programs and the sleepless nights and the prayers and the desperate love offered in hope that somehow things will change before it’s too late. Those parents weep bitter tears...

The camera pans away from Peter who weeps inconsolably and we’re back to the bigger storyline. Jesus on trial for his life. Peter weeping bitterly for his own soul. Split screens.

Somehow it's always like this for Peter in the Gospels. Frenetic, back and forth. The best Peter and the worst Peter. The self-assured Peter and the broken-hearted Peter. Peter the fragile disciple who denied Jesus and Peter the strong disciple whom Jesus identified as the rock upon which his church would be built.

When it comes to Peter, the stories are always dramatic. Like a movie with numerous plot twists and turns. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

I suppose that's how it is for all of us. We long to be in the same picture with Jesus, eating supper, fishing alongside him in the boat, walking in his footsteps. But more often than we would like or care to admit, we're in a split screen. With Jesus on one side of the frame and you and me on the other. Jesus busy doing God's thing and asking us to follow him on the way. And each of us doing our own thing and following our own impulses and desires. We long to be in the good company and the good graces of Jesus. And yet, we are good at creating fractured, fragmented pictures where we're doing what we choose and Jesus is out of focus.

Thank God Jesus had the last word with Peter. Peter had to do a good deal of soul searching after that night out in the courtyard. He needed to confess his shortcoming and his weakness. And he had to hold himself accountable for failing Jesus.

Still, Peter persevered. On Easter morning, Peter heard the news from the women about Jesus rising from the dead and he ran at breakneck speed to see the empty tomb for himself. A short while later, the resurrected Jesus met Peter on the beach.

"Do you love me, Peter?" Jesus asked three times. "Yes, Lord, I love you," Peter responded three times. "Then feed my sheep," Jesus concluded. Which was the last word spoken to Peter by Jesus. Peter's denial of Jesus came in response to three questions. Now redemption for Peter came in response to three questions as well. Two men, dear friends, back on the same page in the same picture.

On the front cover of your bulletin this morning, you will see a picture painted by noted artist, Caravaggio, entitled *The Crucifixion of St. Peter*. Tradition tells us that Peter was himself arrested by Emperor Nero and charged with being a Christian. All this happened around the year 64, some thirty years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Like Jesus, Peter was sentenced to die on a cross. But as the story goes, Peter requested that he be crucified upside down because he wasn't worthy to die in the same exact manner as Jesus.

In Caravaggio's painting, take a close look at Peter. He's an old man with gray hair. And there is a nail piercing his left hand. But the expression on his face strikes me as one of a man who has no fear. To be sure, Peter was likely in pain. Yet to me he doesn't look frightened.

I think Peter knows something even as he nears the hour of his own death. He knows how much Jesus loves him. In spite of his denials and failures along the way, Jesus has forgiven Peter, renewing his faith and restoring his spirit.

It looks to me like Peter is almost reaching out to Jesus. Reaching out beyond his own cross to the Saving One with whom he will soon be reunited. In hope and in mercy forever.

Be assured this Lent that Jesus offers the same love and renewal and restoration to each of us he once offered to Peter. No matter how far we fall short, Jesus yearns for us to be in the same frame with him. Part of one whole picture. Amen.