

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Lent, March 11, 2012

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 446. 516:1-2, 444. 528:1-5, 449.

Lessons: Zechariah 13:1-7, 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:14, John 13:33 - 14:7.

Sermon Text: Matthew 26:30-35

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltritt

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Peter vowed he would never deny Jesus. He was confident of himself. He had plenty of courage and the best of intentions. And maybe, as long as he was surrounded by the other 10 disciples who echoed his brave words, he may not have denied Jesus.

But of course Jesus' prediction came true. In our text Jesus was planting a thought in Peter's memory that would serve him well. For even though he seems to have forgotten Jesus' warning by the time he made his way to the high priest's courtyard, the crowing rooster jolted his memory and moved him to bitter tears of repentance. Today let's talk about

DENIAL

- 1. Peter didn't intend to deny Christ, but he did.**
- 2. The other disciples didn't intend to abandon Jesus, but they did.**
- 3. We never intend to deny Christ, but ...**

Matthew and Mark record that this was on the way to Gethsemane. Luke tells us Jesus gave a warning also while they were together in the upper room. Luke adds a special warning about Satan wanting to sift Peter like wheat. Jesus gave this warning to Peter both at the Last Passover – First Lord's Supper gathering and on the way to Gethsemane. Jesus warned Peter that he would deny him and Peter insisted he would not. You know how it turned out.

In our gospel lesson Jesus said *"Where I am going, you cannot come."* John 13:33 Peter makes it clear that he intends to follow Jesus. *"Jesus answered, 'Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!'"* (John 13:38)

On the way to Gethsemane Jesus made another shocking announcement that the rest of the disciples would also desert their Lord. *"This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"* This fulfills what the prophet Zechariah spoke: *"'Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!' declares the LORD Almighty. 'Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.'"* (Zechariah 13:7) Jesus had spoken to them previously, telling them *"I am the good shepherd"*. (John 10:14) Now he tells them that they, the sheep, would be scattered. And that's exactly what did happen. All of the disciples will fall away. They will stumble into sin and abandon Jesus in the Garden.

But we read that Peter boasted *"Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."*

Peter's boast was brave, but he would really be overcome by Satan and by his own sinful flesh, pressured by the sinful world around him. Jesus knew what would really happen and warned Peter: this very night you will disown me three times. The crowing rooster will witness it – and, as it turned out, remind Peter of Jesus' warning and lead to Peter's repentance.

Jesus reveals that Satan had desired to test the faith of Peter, sifting him like wheat, as we might do to separate wheat from stones or chaff. Jesus had prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail and that after his repentance he would strengthen his fellow believers. Peter, however, boasts that he is ready to go to prison and even death with Jesus. He thinks he does not need Jesus to say any special prayer for him.

Listen: ***“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” But he replied, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.’”*** (Luke 22:31-38)

How little Peter knows his own weaknesses is revealed to him by Jesus: three times he will deny his Lord before the new day dawns. Only the prayers of Jesus and the power of God save his faith from failing totally.

Peter thinks he is strong enough. He claims that he would follow Jesus even at the cost of his life. He thinks he is ready but he is relying on himself. But he fails miserably in this appraisal of himself. His original name was Simon. Jesus had given him the name Peter, which means “rock” in the Greek, but in this instance Peter did not rest solidly on the rock of our salvation and was altogether too self-important. He was really weak.

He said that although all the others would deny Jesus, he certainly would not. At this time, he did not remember the special rebuke Christ had given him previously when he tried to tell Jesus to stop talking about suffering and dying. ***“But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”*** (Mark 8:33)

Jesus does not argue with Peter but makes a definite prophecy introduced with the solemn oath ***“I tell you the truth,”*** ***“Verily I say unto thee”*** (KJV)

Mark gives the greatest detail of the prophecy about the rooster crowing. ***“Before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.” But Peter insisted emphatically, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.’ And all the others said the same.”*** (Mark 14:30-31) Jesus is telling Peter: ‘you think you can die with me, but this very night you are going to be denying me three times.’ Peter is convinced in his own mind that Jesus’ words will not be fulfilled in him. He assures Jesus again that he is ready to go, not only into prison, but even unto death with him.

When Peter asserts he will not deny Jesus, the other disciples join in. He was not alone in disagreeing with his Lord and asserting his faithfulness and strength. All the others said the same. And all of them were wrong. Christ Jesus had to walk the way of the cross all alone. Of course he was the only one who could walk the way of the cross. We can in no way contribute to redeeming ourselves.

Before dawn Peter would deny him not only once, not twice, but three times, even with cursing and swearing. The rooster crowed early in the morning, at two times. Jesus called attention to the crowing of the rooster because Peter would hear it and thus be reminded of what he had just done, as Jesus had foretold. But Peter rejected Jesus’ words. He claimed he certainly would never deny Jesus, not even if he had to die with him. Peter did not know how weak he really was. Poor mistaken Peter! He may readily imagine that the other disciples could be so faithless but in his own case never! He certainly had a lot of faith and confidence in himself.

But Satan is permitted to make the attempt with Peter. Peter fails this trial wretchedly but it is due to the intercession of Jesus that Satan’s victory is temporary and not final.

Here is the summary from the four gospels that you hear during our midweek services of what happened to Peter in the courtyard of the high priest during Jesus’ trial:

“While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. “You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” she said. But he denied it. “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,” he said, and went out into the entryway. Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” Again he denied it.

“After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” One of the high priest’s servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, “Didn’t I see you with him in the olive grove?” Then he began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.” Immediately the rooster crowed the second time.

“The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows twice, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

How could he! He had received personal instruction, encouragement, and even admonition from Jesus for nearly three years. He had received a specific warning from Jesus. But he had just blown it off and said ‘no way. It will never happen.’ Peter had relied too much on his own strength and his own confidence and his own worthiness.

Can you imagine the look that Jesus gave Peter that reminded him of his words? Love? Reproach? Sadness? All we know is that Jesus looked at him. No words were necessary.

Contrition and repentance were necessary before Peter could be restored to be an apostle of Jesus. We see his contrition in his weeping bitterly. But he was more than just contrite. He also had faith that Jesus could forgive his sins, faith that was lacking in Judas. Peter didn’t see Jesus until after the resurrection, and he was the first apostle to run to the empty tomb. We see his repentance – his faith that Jesus could forgive his sins – in his running to the empty tomb on the day of resurrection. But he was not restored to his apostolic office until the disciples met with Jesus at the sea of Galilee, as recorded in the very last chapter of John’s gospel, when Jesus told him three times to ***“feed my lambs”, “feed my sheep”, “feed my sheep.”*** (John 21:15-17)

Peter’s bitter experience teaches us that we dare not rely upon ourselves or trust ourselves to stand strong but rather must build our trust upon the grace of God alone. Peter himself warns us ***"Cast all your anxiety [KJV: care] on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."*** (1 Peter 5:7-9)

When we visualize Peter speaking so boldly and then remember his cowardice and denial later that same night, each of us must feel a twinge of guilt. We recall, perhaps, a number of times when we had bold intentions for Jesus that melted into cowardly denial when we were tested. The cock crows for us too. As you heard in our epistle lesson: ***"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"*** (1 Corinthians 10:12 NIV) ***"Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."*** (1 Corinthians 10:12 KJV) Peter really had no business going into the courtyard of the high priest, the very den of the servants of Satan. How often have we ventured into places where we weren’t sure we should go – or even knew we shouldn’t go – and got in trouble for it?

There is more than one lesson in this for us. Certainly we can learn something about humility from the words of Jesus and something about repentance. We must also realize the importance of being together with other believers. We need each other. The disciples ran away when Jesus was captured and this was part of Satan’s desire to divide and conquer, an old military tactic that works well. Remember Hebrews 10:23-25: ***"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."***

If the apostles, including Peter, who had been with Jesus for almost 3 years and had witnessed his miracles and experienced the truthfulness of his words, would abandon and deny Jesus in the hour of danger, what about us? Our sinful nature wants to reject the words of God, to think they don’t apply, to ignore God’s warnings. Our only source of strength is Jesus. He comes to us in Word and Sacrament, and we must be careful never to separate ourselves from Word and Sacrament.

Yes, Peter denied Jesus. We deny Jesus. But Jesus died for our sins, and the plea to repent is something we can hear as long as we live, and only as long as we listen to God’s word. Repent, believe the gospel, and be saved! Now is the time, as Jesus told us: ***"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."*** (Mark 1:15 KJV) We find our hope and comfort in such words of Jesus. Like the father whose son was healed of demon possession, we pray: ***"Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."*** (Mark 9:24 KJV) Amen.