

April 2, 2010

Good Friday, Year C, Hour 3

Luke 22:54-65

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When we read the whole Gospel, we can see this coming. Jesus knows this about Peter, about the disciples. Two times, in the Gospel according to Luke, the disciples argue about who will be the greatest among them. Jesus constantly tells them, the least is the greatest. It is the servant is the blessed. Jesus knows his disciples. He knows they do not understand him. He knows he will be abandoned. Indeed Peter and Jesus discuss on this very evening, the betrayal of our Lord.

So, it comes to pass. Peter, the one who falls to his knees and calls Jesus Lord, now denies Jesus. Peter, the one who confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, Peter who witnesses the Transfiguration of Jesus, now denies Jesus in this dark hour. Peter, the one who this very day said "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" now says, "I do not know this man."

If it is not clear as to why Peter does this at the moment of the betrayal, it becomes crystal clear only moments later. The mocking and beating of a blindfolded Jesus spell it out for us. It turns out that guilt by association and the prospect of death may be a little too much for Peter. Self-preservation trumps loyalty. Survival and security trumps faithfulness. Peter, who is so gung-ho from the beginning, who is full of energy and enthusiasm throughout the ministry of Jesus, has lost his nerve.

We know that feeling don't we? We know what it feels like to lose our nerve, to make decisions based on fear. We begin our lives in Christian faith with enthusiasm and innocence. We learn the story as children and we believe. We carry the story into our adulthood. Or perhaps we have come to faith later in life, we are really jazzed by the word of God and we get baptized and embrace Jesus Christ with full love and enthusiasm. But, over time, we wane. We might restart our faith many times in our life, a fresh start to a life in Christ, saying our Baptismal Vows publicly, enthusiastically, to resist evil, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. Yet, many times have we missed the mark. The heat of everyday life wears us down. Then in our own hours of darkness, much like Peter, we are worn, tired and beaten down. We lose that resolve. When faced with the difficulty of our promises, we choose the denial of Christ, rather than to seek Christ in others and even in ourselves. We know about Peter, because we see Peter in ourselves.

What holds us back? What do we fear? What are we holding onto in our self-preservation? What keeps us from saying I know this Jesus Christ? Is it death?

Death of status among those who do not share our beliefs? Death of relationships? Death of prosperity?

For some around the world, a Christian life means the possibility of literal death. There are still Christian martyrs out there. For us, we have a freedom to worship without the fear of death. But, in a sense we still fear a kind of death, the death of certain way of life as we know it. It is easier to guard our way, than to totally accept a new way, the way of life and freedom promised to us in Jesus Christ. Ironically, when we choose to hold on to our lives as we know them, to protect our status more fervently than our faith, we deny Christ, and we do not find life, but death itself. Our lifestyles become idols of worship and we turn away from the God that gives us life. We turn away from the one who gives us life and grab hold of the things which have no life in itself, money, security, safety, status. The choices we make to protect these idols then set off a chain reaction of painful consequences. Those around us suffer from our sin. Our relationships suffer; our connection to God suffers. Our ability to see Christ in others suffers, to the point when we say "I do not know this Jesus." Our choices mean death for us, because we cut ourselves off from God and we kill off Christ in our world. We know Peter's plight all too well.

Yet, it is here in dark moments where Christ still meets us. Jesus sees Peter when Peter denies him. He looks upon him. We do not know the details of that gaze. But, if we believe that Jesus was consistent, one with integrity to the end, then we can believe there was understanding and love in that look. Jesus loved to the end, even those who betrayed him. Jesus looks upon us too, with that same gaze. Our real chance at change is not too far away. But first, we must hear the story. Hear today how denial leads to the death of the one who loved; reflect on our contribution to the continuing story, recognize our failures. After spending time in this story and at the cross, we can then head down the path of repentance and restoration.