

March 29 Thursday: The Longest Night
Mark 14:17-25, 66-72

Holy Thursday is full of drama. In the evening, Jesus eats a final meal with his followers and then they go to the Mt. of Olives where he prays for deliverance in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is then betrayed by Judas and arrested. He is abandoned by the rest of his disciples. Jesus is taken to the house of the high priest where he is interrogated and condemned to death by the Sanhedrin. While this is happening, in the courtyard, Peter denies ever knowing Jesus three times.

I want to begin by quickly going through the events of today and then spend most of our time on the actions of Peter. It begins with Jesus giving instructions to two of his disciples to go into the city and look for a man carrying a water jar. He will take them to the place where they are to prepare the meal. Men usually did not carry water jars and so one doing so would stand out. It shows pre-planning on Jesus and the owner of the room's part. It isn't stated, but implied, that the reason for the secrecy is that Jesus is aware that Judas has agreed to betray him and is looking for an opportunity. All of this planning shows how much Jesus wants to share this Passover meal with his followers.

Then we have the meal. There are three main elements in Mark's story of the Last Supper: they eat the Passover meal together; Jesus speaks of his imminent betrayal; and then Jesus invests the bread and wine with meanings associated with his impending death. When Mark describes what Jesus did at the end of the Last Supper he uses four verbs: took, blessed, broke, and gave. These refer back to Jesus feeding the five thousand where he took the five loaves and two fish, blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples.

Judas leaves sometime after the meal. He knows Jesus' patterns and where he will be going. Jesus and the rest of the disciples go to a garden on the Mount of Olives. One of the new learnings from my recent trip concerns this garden. Gardens on the Mount of Olives were private. The land was valuable and owned by wealthy people. Who owned this garden and had given Jesus permission to use it? The best candidates are wealthy powerful members of the Sanhedrin. It would need to be someone like this to own olive trees with a view overlooking the temple. Joseph of Arimathea had a garden and tomb in another place near Jerusalem so he probably did not also own land on the Mt. of Olives. The most likely candidate is Nicodemus. Perhaps his conversations with Jesus had caused him to, if not believe that Jesus was the messiah, at least cause him to offer Jesus a place of rest. Before

leaving the upper room, Jesus first proclaims that all will desert him but also points to the hope of forgiveness when he says he will go before them to Galilee. Peter proclaims that he would never desert Jesus, to which Jesus says that before morning Peter will have denied three times even knowing him. Peter protests. Upon arriving at the garden, Jesus takes his inner three, James, John and Peter with him further into the garden and asks them to stay awake and pray. Even bold Peter cannot honor this simple request, so his failure to be a true disciple begins here. Then Judas comes and betrays with a kiss. There is a brief scuffle and the disciples flee. Except for Peter, the disciples now disappear from the story of Holy Week. Mark does not mention them again until Easter. Mark never mentions the fate of Judas.

Peter follows at a distance as Jesus is taken to the home of the high priest. Most likely, Mark and the other early Christians did not know exactly what happened. We are told that no follower of Jesus was present with him after his arrest. So, what we have is second hand information given long after the event. During this interrogation, Peter is in the courtyard and it is here that he denies Jesus three times and then leaves weeping bitter tears. From here until Easter, in the Gospel of Mark, only the women who knew Jesus stay near him, first at the cross and later at the tomb.

At the end of the proceedings, those who had convened to hear testimony against Jesus decide that he is to be turned over to Pilate for sentencing and death. We learned on our travels that following the trial they would have likely put Jesus in a dry cistern. Traditionally they would have left Jesus hanging from ropes under his arms with his feet just a few inches above the ground. He would have hung there until morning. It was a way to increase his pain and sense of isolation. We were able to go down into a cistern that is supposedly the one used to hold Jesus. Standing there looking up at that little circle of light imagining him hanging left a deep impression on me. It reminds me anew of how much God was willing to suffer for my sins. Friday will begin at dawn with them taking Jesus to Pilate.

Now that we have heard about the entire day, I want to get back to the actions of the twelve. The betrayal by Judas, the disciples fleeing the garden and Peter's denial are all part of the central theme of failed discipleship. In Mark, the story of betrayal is not for Judas alone. Mark sees the denial by Peter and the abandonment of Jesus by the rest as also a form of betrayal. They are pictured as having broken covenant and community with Jesus. In the Easter stories—implicitly in Mark and explicitly in the other gospels—Peter and the rest of the disciples are restored to relationship and community by Jesus. Indeed, had

Judas not killed himself, we may imagine that even the betrayer would have been given the opportunity to be restored to relationship and community.

Have you ever thought of why it was important for the gospels to talk about the actions of Peter and the others? Think about the time in which this Gospel was written. It was a time soon after the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome. Many Jews in the empire blamed the Christians for instigating this disastrous revolt and so had thrown the believers out of their synagogues or worse turned them over to the authorities. Christians were being persecuted by Emperor Nero who blamed them for the fires that destroyed much of Rome, and by Roman officials, across the empire, for not honoring the emperor through worship.

Mark is therefore writing to Christians who were oppressed, arrested and even killed for their faith. He challenges them to follow Jesus' example of courageously holding on to their beliefs, instead of Peter's denial, but lets them know that even if they are like Peter there is hope. So the questions become: "How do we stay faithful during difficult times?" and "Where is our hope when we have stumbled and failed?"

There is no one correct answer to either of these questions but here are some of the things I believe Mark points us to. One is to not be over confident. Peter could not comprehend how he would ever get in a place where denial would even be an option. In that self-confidence he ended up failing. Realizing that failure is always an option causes us to seek help from others. Another word I hear from Mark is that we need to be careful to not let our emotions control our actions. The disciples, who ran when Jesus was arrested, were not bad men and not even particularly weak people. They were afraid and let fear motivate them. Whenever we quit thinking and just go with the crowd, with what feels good, or with our instincts, without thinking it through, we can get ourselves into trouble and end up failing.

These words seem to be especially relevant to what we are going through. This past weekend we saw people carrying on with life as normally as they could, over confident that they will not get the disease. It caused the governor to issue the stay-at-home order. I am hoping our inbred desire to be independent doesn't cause us to not ask for help. Some of you are the most vulnerable. Others will be glad to get you some groceries or other things you need. Don't be so over confident that you can do it yourself that you get into trouble.

It is also saying that we need to be aware of our weaknesses, be deliberate in our actions and think through how we can be faithful in all circumstances. This is part of what it means to be faithful in difficult times. Let me give you a quick example. I recall meeting with

two sisters right after their dad had been found dead in his home. He had fallen and broken his hip and had not been able to get to a phone. One of the girls was angry at God, at the neighbors, at life. She was saying some pretty mean and hurtful things. The other sat there listening for a bit and finally, but firmly, said, "The only one to blame, if there is blame, is Dad. We both asked him to wear a life alert after mom died but he was too proud and stubborn to do so. We need to be thankful that his church and friends did keep such a good watch over him and I know they would have been there to help if they had sensed something was wrong." The first sister broke into tears. She said, "Don't you understand. I need to be mad at somebody!" To which her sister said, "No you don't. Mom taught you better than that. Forgive and move on." Both had good training, both were people of faith but one was slipping away because she was letting her emotions win while the other thought it through and this gave her the objectivity she needed. Both were grieving.

"Where is the hope?" was the other question. When we fail, we are reminded that there is always forgiveness and restoration to community. We need to realize Jesus is willing to give us a hand up. Yes, the realization that we have denied, betrayed, or run from challenging faith commitments will fill us with despair, just like Peter. But we also remember Jesus' words of forgiveness to Peter after the resurrection. So we can pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and try again. Because remember, Peter, the one who denied, ultimately became one of the bravest of the twelve in proclaiming the good news. His transformation and restoration is our hope and joy as well.

Jesus is in the hands of the powerful who want to silence those who proclaim a different and challenging view of God and of faith. Tomorrow, Rome will get their hands on him. We leave him hanging in the dark, alone except for God.