

Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

³¹ Then Jesus told them, “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.’” ³² But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” ³³ Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” ³⁴ “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” ³⁵ But Peter declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the other disciples said the same.

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” she said. ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. ⁷¹ Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁷² He denied it again, with an oath: “I don’t know the man!” ⁷³ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, “Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away.” ⁷⁴ Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!” Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.”

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021
Midweek Series: “The Solemn Hours of Lent”

Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75 “Hour of Denial”

"Could you not watch with me for one hour?" That is what Jesus asked his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane after he had asked them to watch and pray with them. But they fell asleep. One hour, sixty minutes. That was all Jesus asked of them. That is what Jesus asks of us also, during these midweek services, to watch with him, to learn the truths of his Word and to find in him our Savior.

During this season of Lent we will call our time together the Solemn hours of Lent. And they were, only, a few hours. From about six pm on Thursday evening until 6:00 pm on Friday, 24 hours when Jesus ate the Passover with his disciples, was arrested, tried, crucified, died and was buried. Those were indeed solemn hours, the meaning of which we will contemplate and learn from as we focus on eight important events during that period of time. Our journey starts today. We

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will want to watch and pray with Jesus as we consider those 24 solemn hours of Lent.

And surely what makes those hours so solemn is the reason for Jesus' suffering and death--our sins and the sins of the world. And in a way, we find a paradigm for our sins and the world's sins in a certain one of those solemn hours, the hour of denial. For that is what every person must decide, whether I will confess Jesus as my Lord and Savior and defend his name and his truth, or turn my back on him and deny that I know him.

And just as it was so easy for Peter to boast about how he would never deny Jesus, that he was ready to die with him if necessary, so it is easy for us in earthly comfort and security to say we would never fall into the sin Peter fell into. But our Savior says to us as he said to those with him in the Garden, watch and pray that you will not fall into temptation. Rise, let us go. The hour is at hand when the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

As we listen to Jesus warn his disciples, we are struck once again with how solemn the situation really was. "**This night, you will all fall away on account of me,**" Jesus said. The Savior was warning them ahead of time about their sin. He was not only pointing to Peter, but all of them. He reminded them of the prophecy in Zechariah 13, "**I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.**" Jesus was warning them in this solemn hour that it was an hour of which they needed to beware. Satan would try to use every event possible in the next 24 hours to tempt the disciples to sin against Jesus and finally abandon him. And Satan is certainly not above using our overconfidence to trap us.

Peter in particular was very confident of himself and his loyalty to Jesus. But when our Lord warns us, we need to listen carefully. Peter was relying on himself, on his own ability and strength. That was the source of his confidence. We can hear the over-confidence in his words, **Even if everyone else falls away from you, I NEVER will.** There is no prayer for strength, there is no acknowledgment that he has a sinful nature. There is no admitting that he has no strength of his own to rely on. He does not ask Jesus to preserve him from temptation.

So Jesus warns us in this hour to beware of boldness based on our own strength. Haven't you found yourself at times being so determined to serve someone or to help others in a certain situation, or to be a fearless witness for the Savior and suddenly when the moment of truth comes we forget all our good intentions. Why? Because we depended on our own strength, instead of acknowledging that we are weak and sinful--instead of acknowledging that we need Jesus every moment of every day to give us the strength to confess him, to let our light shine so that others will see our Savior in our actions and words. But so

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often it is our sinful actions and words that come out isn't it? We need to listen to the warning of our Savior about the times in which we live--Satan and the world are always at work to lead us away from Christ.

We are almost amazed at Peter and John who followed Jesus. Somehow John had contacts in the house of the High Priest and was able to gain admittance right away. Did they follow only because of Peter's insistence above John's objections? We don't know. What we do know is that it was fool hardy for Peter to follow right into the den of the Savior's enemies. And doing that did he expect that there would be no challenges for his faith? Or did he think that HE was strong enough to withstand those enemies of Jesus who were sure to challenge Peter and his reason for being inside the walls of the High Priest's residence?

Peter has apparently put out of his mind his Lord's warning about his weakness that he would indeed deny him three times. It was almost as if he considered Jesus to be lying. Didn't he know that Jesus could see the future? But then, when Jesus told his disciples that he would be captured and crucified and then be raised to life, Peter even rebuked Jesus to say that such a thing would never happen to him. And if we look at ourselves we have to find a little bit of Peter inside ourselves don't we? We think we know better than God. It is interesting that there seems to be almost a direct correlation between my sinful confidence in myself, my denial of who I am as a sinner, and the consequent denial of Jesus that I am likely to be guilty of. We see that with Peter don't we? He essentially denied that he would be susceptible to sin even though he went right into the den of Jesus' enemies. When he did that he ended up denying Jesus because he was confident in himself instead of in God.

Do I find myself, going places where God's enemies are likely to hang out? And perhaps it is the material I read, or the movies or TV programs I watch. If we think those things don't have an influence on us we are truly mistaken. It is easy to adopt an idea of selfishness that goes against scripture and make it a part of who we are. I was not able to go to Lutheran elementary School except for the last three years. About a year before I was able to go to LES I remember the teacher in my public school making the statement, 'You make sure you take care of number one. You are most important in your life and don't let anyone tell you different.' It was only after several years of Lutheran School that I was able to see what a selfish, humanistic statement that really was. Each time we adopt that kind of attitude, we again see our sin and our need for the forgiveness for our selfishness, forgiveness that only Jesus can give us.

If Peter had been aware of his weakness, if he had realized that he had fooled himself into believing he was being loyal to Jesus by following him, instead of

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heeding his warning about his coming denial, Peter would have been alert to the dangers he was walking into. As it was, the hour of denial was an hour that took him unaware.

The realization soon set in for Peter that people in the High Priest's house might be able to identify him and the result was fear in Peter's heart: **'Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"**' Now where is Peter's bravado? Where is his bragging about how he would never deny Jesus? Where is his boldness? It has melted away and he finds it replaced by fear.

Now there was no one to stand with him. Why? Not only had he not heeded Jesus warnings, not only had he gone right in among the Savior's enemies, he had not even asked Jesus to be with him and help him fight against the temptations he would face. When we fail to ask our Lord for help and strength in the face of temptations we find fear easily overcomes the boldness we thought we had because of our own strength.

Perhaps you have found yourself in an unfamiliar situation, perhaps in a group of people who don't share your convictions about God's Word or the difference about what is right and what is wrong. And then someone asks you about your religious beliefs. How easy it is for us to say very little, to water down our witness about Jesus and what he did to save us. How easy it is to forget that our God gave us our faith and his word so that we contend for the truth of God's Word. After all, how are people who don't know God and his love going to know the truth unless you and I share it with them from God's Word? When the love of our God fills our hearts, then we can put away fear because God will not allow any kind of danger in the world to take away our place in heaven.

That is the power of our Savior's crucifixion. That night he knew he would die and he wanted his disciples to know the blessings they would receive from him. We can see this grace of Jesus most clearly in his warning to Peter. **Jesus told them, "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.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."**

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Jesus was warning Peter for his own good. But this was a gracious warning. Jesus knew Peter was full of sinful self-confidence. Yet Jesus wanted to leave Peter with a signal, a reminder, clear evidence that he had sinned. It was the crowing of the rooster. It doesn't seem like much. It was something that marked the hour was after midnight. But as Peter heard the crowing and another gospel writer tells us Jesus looked directly at Peter, he was convicted. And now hearing with his ears and seeing with his own eyes that Jesus had warned him about his sin, the full weight of what he had done came crashing down on him.

And when he saw his Lord crucified, he could know, yes, it was my sin that put Jesus there. But, he could also know, it is my Lord who has died for me to pay for my sins too.

What a blessing it is for us to have had Christian parents, fellow believers to point out our sins and lead us to repent so that we turn to our Savior. Sometimes the very thing that seems like the worst hour of our lives, is the way our Lord quashes our sinful pride, brings us to our spiritual senses and moves us to daily contrition and repentance. And in that hour it becomes more than a saying, it IS the way we resolve to live our lives, not by our own power, but by the power of the cross where we find forgiveness for every sin. Amen.