

Faces Around the Cross

LENT MID-WEEK 2

Text: Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

February 24, 2021

Peter

During our midweek Lenten services, we will be looking at the faces around the cross. We will be looking at the lives of some of the people who were involved in the events of the crucifixion.

The first face we will look at
is Peter.

When we think about the disciples of Jesus,
Peter is, likely, the first one that comes to mind.

Any painting of Jesus and the disciples
most likely portrays Peter's standing next to the Lord
because he was a significant fixture in so many of the gospel stories.
Peter was one of the first disciples called by Jesus,
and, as the gospels point out, he wasted no time
casting aside his fisherman's net in order to follow Jesus.

As we follow the narrative of the gospels, who can ever forget:

- Peter's dumb-founded awe on the Mount of Transfiguration as he stood there in the presence of Jesus, Moses and Elijah...
- or when he jumped into the water to walk with Jesus on the stormy waters of the Sea of Galilee
- or Peter's great confession of faith, a confession upon which the whole church of Christ is founded
- or his disbelief of the women on Easter morning, and yet his frantic dash to the tomb to see if their story was really true.

As the New Testament points out,
whenever there was a big moment in the life of Christ,
Peter was there standing close to his Lord.

In many of these experiences,
Peter shows us a great depth of perceptiveness and faith
as he acknowledges the power of God
that is present in the ministry of Jesus.

The depth and perceptiveness of Peter's faith really shines through
in his great confession when he says to Jesus,
You are the Christ, the Son of the living God...

And surely there was faith, albeit misdirected,
when Peter rebuked Jesus for telling the disciples
he was going up to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die
and when he drew his sword in order to defend Jesus
when the soldiers and officials
came to Gethsemane to arrest him.

But in today's lesson,
we see one of the more infamous moments
from Peter's life.

We hear the story of his denial of Jesus.
Here in one brief
agonizing moment,
we see Peter's faith collapse like a house of cards
as he denies that he has
ever known his Lord.

This whole scenario is really incredible.
Peter was so personally committed and close to his Lord.
And yet, he was so head-strong he missed the point of so much of what Jesus said.

He was willing to sacrifice so much of his life
to walk with Jesus
and stand by his side.
And yet because of his impetuous self-reliance,
when the cards were laid on the table
Peter failed to play the card of faith.

Of all the disciples, Peter is the one whose life experiences
are most instructive for us
as we wrestle with issues of growth in faith.

As we look at his life,
we see that Peter was the kind of man who jumped into the water
before thinking about whether or not he could swim.
So often, his mouth was in motion before his brain was in gear.

Remember when Peter was with Jesus
on the Mount of Transfiguration
and Moses and Elijah appeared?

He may have been groggy and sleepy and overcome with awe,
but as always, he wasn't at a loss for words:

Lord this is great. Let's pitch three tents and stay up here forever.

The gospels deal with Peter's enthusiasm rather humorously
reporting that he said this
not knowing what he had said.

How many times have you and I
experienced the power and mystery of God
touching our lives or the lives of those we love
in strange and surprising ways
and have said something
that was really dumb.

Once during a hospital chaplaincy program,
John Cheshire, who was the chaplain at Baptist Hospital in Pensacola,
shared a very painful learning experience he had.

It showed us how dumb we can be when we open our mouths too quickly
in the face of life's awesome encounters
with the mysteries of God.

A family came to the Emergency Room at the hospital
with a young child that was critically ill,
and tragically the child died while undergoing treatment.

As the hospital chaplain, John was called in to console the family,
and he said to them what most of us would say:

I know how you feel.

The mother glared back at him
and spoke words that cut him to the heart:

No you don't! That was my child!

How many of us, like Peter,
have spoken about great issues of faith and life and death
putting our mouths in motion
before our brains are in gear?

And it wasn't just Peter's mouth that got ahead of his brain.
Remember his impulsive actions
on the Sea of Galilee and in the Garden of Gethsemane?

On the Sea of Galilee, he saw Jesus walking toward the disciples in the boat,
and in a great act of faith,
he jumped in and started to walk toward Jesus.

We can almost picture him looking back at the other disciples...
pointing down at the water and saying,
Hey guys, look at me!

But then when the wind blows
and reality sets in...
(me walking on water?)...
he starts to sink
into the roiling waters
of the deep.

And the same kind of thing happens in Gethsemane
when he unsheathes his sword to defend Jesus
from the Praetorian guards who come out to arrest him.
He is ready to take on the whole company of guards
never stopping to think if this is going to accomplish anything
that will benefit him or his Lord.

How many of us are like that?
How many of us are ready to
leap into action for the Lord,
without ever stopping to think,
*Lord, what do you want me to do,
and how do you want me to do it?*

I love Peter! I can truly relate to him because I am like him in so many ways.
His life is so instructive for my growth in faith
because there are so many parallels between us.

And what is most instructive
is the transformation
that occurs in his life
as he struggles with what it means to be a disciple
after the events of Easter
and the commission to go and make disciples.

The internal evidence of the New Testament
suggests that after his denial of Jesus,
Peter was never quite so impulsive again.

In fact,

there was a period of several years after the resurrection
when Peter stayed in the background
abdicating his role of leadership in the church
to James,
the brother of Jesus.

But somewhere in there,

God got a hold of his life and turned him around...
and made him a valiant witness.

By the time of Paul,

Peter is once again an authoritative
leader and spokesman for the church.

What is so instructive in all of this is the fact that

God can take us in the midst of our weaknesses and failures,
and by his gracious presence in our lives do great things through us.

Listen to these words of Peter which were written

as his last instructions to his brothers and sisters in Christ
shortly before he was martyred for the faith:

Discipline yourselves, keep alert.

Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around,

looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith...! Peter 5:8-9a

Do you think he was sharing this wisdom with them from personal experience?

You bet he was!

He was sharing with them what he had learned:

If you trust in yourself,

you shall surely stumble and fall!

But if you trust in Christ,

you shall surely stand and live!

I know I am a lot like Peter in my shortcomings—

I am impetuous...hardheaded...unthinking...

and incredibly oblivious to the gentle urgings of the spirit.

Indeed, I am all these things!

But by grace of God, I am also like Peter

in that I know who picks me up when I fall...

and takes the feeble words of my mouth and works of my hands...

and shapes and blesses them...

into beautiful works of faith.