

Sermon: Bethlehem and Zion. March 8

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John 18:12-27

In last week's reading, we got a brief vignette from John's account of Jesus's last supper with his disciples. There's plenty more to the story.

John's gospel does not recount the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine that we see in the other gospels. Instead, we have the foot-washing we read last week. After the foot washing in chapter 13, verses 1-17, Jesus takes off his towel, he puts his robe back on, and Jesus CHATS.

Beyond last week's passage, in verses 18-30, he predicts his betrayal by Judas. He knows what's going to happen to him in the coming 24 hours.

Like the verses written by Lin Manuel-Miranda from the musical "Hamilton," like Alexander Hamilton, it feels like he has "imagined death so much it feels more like a memory."

In verse 34, he commands his disciples: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

And in verse verses 37 and 38, the apostle Peter pledges that he will lay down his life for Jesus, and Jesus predicts Peter's very specific betrayal. "I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!"

Christ's after-dinner chat continues in chapter 14 with more life advice, and in 15 with specific advice on discipleship, which continues in chapter 16.

In chapter 17, He PRAYS. He prays for the strength to face the trial ahead. He prays for the protection of his group of disciples. Then He prays further outward, for the unity of all who will hear His message...down to us in the present time.

Chapter 18 comes, and he heads out. The disciples follow. And Jesus is arrested. What a night!

We come to today's reading, verses 12-27, and Peter's first denial that he is with Jesus. And his second denial. His Galileean accent is giving him away. He denies his association with Jesus a third time. The cock crows, and it is the morning of Jesus's crucifixion.

Can WE fall that far? Can we betray our Christian identity that deeply? We do not have the literal, physical Jesus in our life. We do have our faith, our identity as a follower of Jesus in our lives.

At my workplace, some managers will start staff meetings with a fun icebreaker:

What is your favorite flavor of ice cream (and why)?

What superpower do you wish you had?

And one week: What is your favorite book?

While I am internally debating the relative merits of "The Great Gatsby" and "Lord of the Rings," Tim, a program manager, without hesitation, blurts out "The Bible!"

Tim...WOW! Should *I* be doing that?

Is it denying Jesus – betraying Jesus - when we are Christian – Lutheran – and do not daily mention it...promote it...advertise our Christianity on our sleeve...make it part of our...personal brand?

Walking on the street...working in a locked room late at night...sitting around the conference room at work...

How do we best embody our Christian faith?

Let's scoot over to the Gospel of Matthew for a minute. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns his listeners:

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them....When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets....And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the temple and on the street corners to be seen by others."

A few sermons ago I offered a quote from one of the "Harry Potter" novels in support of my discussion. Today's unlikely and reluctantly offered teacher is

Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen – a gentleman I would typically not go to for spiritual or policy advice.

My wife Annie, in her capacity as a member of the Lincoln Public Schools board, recently spoke to Pillen at an event honoring teachers.

One of the things that he said to her in a brief interaction is that one of his regrets as governor is that he does so many small things in his position that nobody knows about. And some of these un-public actions are some of the things that he sees as his most important actions.

As Jesus urges in the Sermon on the Mount that the best prayer is behind closed doors, Pillen sees some of his best work is things done out of the public eye.

We can contrast this with some high leaders on the state and national level who insist that the United States is a nation self-evidently founded on Christian values.

These same flamboyantly Christian leaders repeatedly campaign against, vote down, slander, and actively work to reduce programs and policies that will uplift the oppressed, welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, and heal the ill and injured.

They proclaim their righteousness publicly, and pray standing above others in the temples of government.

And to my eye they are often denying the teachings and the example of Jesus until the cock crows and until the cows come home.

Before Jesus predicted Peter's betrayal, Peter had said that he would lay down his life for Jesus.

That prediction was ALSO correct.

Early Church tradition relates that Peter was one of many Christians executed and martyred by the Roman Emperor Nero in the year 64 after a disastrous fire in the city of Rome. Possibly around the same time as St. Paul was executed.

Contemplate THAT redemption story. Peter is Jesus's SECOND greatest betrayer. Moderately behind Judas – the clear frontrunner.

Fifty years later he is the leader of the early Christian church - the first precursor to the Pope.

The last shall be first indeed!

How are we, in our daily lives, to associate with Jesus, to proclaim our Christianity?

Locked in a room...out on the street...in a staff meeting at work...

We will do good things. And we will make mistakes. Probably the error that we make in a fraught moment today will not be read worldwide in two millennia, but we have the potential to rebound from regrettable errors to be a great leader and a great example.

On the street...alone in a room...at work...

Try to be guided by one of the last things, and one of the most important commandments that Jesus gave to his disciples and to all of us on his last night on this Earth:

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Amen.

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