

Stay With Us Through the Night

Luke 21:31-46
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Maundy Thursday

It was a dark and stormy night. Actually it probably wasn't. But I bet it felt that way.

There are so many elements to this night that are recorded in each of the gospels. Recently one little verse jumped out at me for the first time in this very familiar story. That's what I love about reading the Bible. Even if you have heard a passage of scripture over and over, the text is alive and each time you read it the Holy Spirit will show you something different. That's what happened to me. I noticed a verse in Luke's version I had never noticed before in chapter 22: 32. This is part of Jesus' foretelling of Peter's denial. I'll back up to verse 31 just for the context. "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat," and here is the verse I had never noticed "but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Dark and stormy nights happen in life. Every person has times of testing and trial. Every person messes up sometime. Sometimes it is a royal mess up. It was for Peter.

Simon Peter was probably Jesus' star student. His faith and his intentions were great. When Jesus tells Peter that Satan wants to sift him like wheat and that he has prayed for him, Peter's response is "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" I have no doubt that he was. Do you remember in the garden when Judas and the crowd come to arrest Jesus? Peter does not shrink back. He is ready to fight and I am sure he is ready to die. He draws his sword and cuts off the ear of a servant of the high priest. A battle was about to erupt. A burning ember had been thrown on very dry grass. You can just feel the tension in the air. Clearly both sides were armed and ready; maybe in that adrenalin-filled moment they were even looking forward to the release in violence. It would have been bloody. Some would have died that night in the garden. But just before a full blown fight explodes, Jesus calms the storm. He rebukes Peter, in some versions he heals the ear of the victim, and he surrenders himself to those who came to arrest him.

The thing that I find interesting is that I really do believe that had a battle blown up at that point, Peter would have remained firmly a Jesus man. He would have fought until captured or killed. If he was afraid, he wouldn't have shown it. This would have been his hour. But that's not how it turned out. We often think that Satan will put us up against some great battle to test us, but usually he goes for something much, much smaller and more insignificant.

It was when Peter was alone and unsuspecting that it happened. A simple, innocent statement from a servant girl: "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." Alone, tired, afraid and caught off guard, the lie just slipped out: "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." Once he started with the lie he had to defend it again or he'd look like an idiot when that same servant girl said to some others "He was one of them". To the point where, when another bystander said to Peter "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean", the Bible says "he began to curse and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." "And that moment", the scriptures go on to say "the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept." (Mark 14:68, 70-72)

Of course it was the simplicity of it all that devastated Peter. Had he run away in battle for fear of being killed, no one would have blamed him. He wouldn't have been

hailed a hero but neither would he have been shamed for not wanting to be stabbed to death. But to not have the courage to tell a servant girl and some other nobodies the truth that Jesus was his friend, his best friend... there was just no excuse for that kind of cowardliness, that kind of betrayal. A voice he'd heard before whispered "*You're weak, you're a coward, you're a failure. You don't deserve to be his friend*". If Peter had been a recovering alcoholic, that's when he would have picked up the bottle again.

Often we gear up for battle and we lock the front door tight, but the attack from the enemy more often than not comes from an open window at the back of the house. Instead of breaking down the front door it is through some simple incident that the enemy comes in through a window and whispers into your heart "You'll never amount to anything, nobody really loves you... *you're worthless*". And we believe him. We might spend our days trying to pretend otherwise but deep down we know those whispers ring true. Suddenly our journey to recovery, our journey to health and healing, our promise to take up our cross and follow Jesus seems like a sham. What was I thinking? I'm worthless. I can't do something so great as to follow Jesus because I can't do something as little as not lose it with the ones I love, or stand up for myself at work, or keep from spending the rest of the money in my account and going into debt or from eating the entire bag of cookies, or, or, or.... you know your weakness all too well and you know it's true. Yes, sometimes people lose their way on the path to follow Jesus to healing and recovery because of something big like the death of a loved one or a loss of a job or relationship, but more often than not it's the little stuff that trips us and makes us take a small step backwards ... you know, just for balance, but then it's another and another and all of the sudden we're in a freefall.

How many people do you know who were doing so well on the journey but have now relapsed to their old life? Relapsed into the old thinking about themselves and into the way that they support or dull the pain of that thinking? The truth is at some point or another we all relapse. Peter did. That's not the issue really. It's almost to be expected on this rough path with a heavy cross on the journey towards a life of freedom and healing and joy. We all lose our way at some point. That's not the issue.

The issue is, ***will you come back?***

That's why I love that verse. Luke 22:32 "...but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Jesus didn't have to tell Peter that he prayed for him in order for his prayer to work. My guess is that Jesus' prayers were pretty effective whether or not the person knew. I believe Jesus told Peter to give him hope in that dark time. Notice the next part "and you, when once you have turned back... strengthen your brothers." What's the important part of that phrase? At first glance it's the 'strengthen your brothers' bit, but I think the key part was 'you come back; you hear'. 'I still have work for you. You come back!'

You see, Jesus knows how dangerous that dark place is. As powerful as Jesus' prayers for Peter were, Peter was the only one who could choose the light or the dark. Peter was the only one who could choose to take that difficult, humiliating and faltering first step back on the path to Jesus and to life, or to curl up in the foetal position and say "Let the light around me become night".

You know my theory and gut hunch—and you can argue with me about this one—but I believe that at one point both Judas and Peter were on a level playing ground. I believe that both Judas and Peter had an equal chance of coming back. Both would have been welcomed back, but only one of them made it back.

It's not about how good a person you are. It's not about whether you are a straight A Christian or more of a C, D or F Christian. It's about whether you will choose to come

back when you fail and when you fall. It's about whether you will choose to name the whispers of the enemy a lie and to hear and believe the *Still Small Voice* of God.

Do you know why the whispers of the enemy ring so true in our heart? It's because there is a shadow of truth to it. And we try to fight those whispers by saying the opposite. When the enemy whispers *you're a failure*, and you're feeling good, you proudly say "No, I'm not. I am a success. Just look at how well I do my job. I'm in control. I work so hard day and night and I make sure everything is perfect." And when the enemy whispers *nobody loves you*, you argue back "That's not true, look at how many relationships I've had! That man loved me and that man or woman loved me."

We try to build our own defence. Most of us spend our lives trying to defend against those deep down whispers. We pick fights, bully others or work out to prove we are strong. We put on an upbeat happy face and laugh a little too much to prove there is no pain. Or we put on a sad face and say "woe is me", we play the victim to prove it isn't our fault. We do everything "perfectly" and we pick out and pick on others imperfections to prove we are in control. We try to build our own empire to prove the whisper wrong... but it doesn't work. There are major cracks in those empires.

And when those tactics don't work we do things to dull the pain: pop pills, seek out pornography, drink, eat, gossip, isolate, pound something or someone. And then we try harder to build that empire and we fail again. It's a vicious and very deadly circle.

But there is a way out of that prison. You can be saved. There is an end to the dark and stormy night of your life.

The **Way** out is Jesus. Jesus washed *all* of his disciples' feet, Jesus accepted the cup that the Father gave to him, Jesus surrendered to the crowd, Jesus went through the torture, the humiliation, and died in a brutal way on a cross because of you. Not because you are good or perfect, or strong, or in control, or adored by the world, but because you are spiteful and weak; you are broken and imperfect; you are out of control and disliked. **And, and because he loves you.** Never forget the 'and'. You see the enemy is partly right, but mostly wrong. The enemy always leaves out the 'and'. Jesus is not just the *Way*, he is also the *Truth*. The real truth is you are loved, not because of your accomplishments, but because you were created in the image of God. From the time of conception your life bore the finger print of your maker. I heard recently that there is a town or city in China named "Usa"... (USA). The reason they called the town that is of course to be able to put on the tag *Made in USA*. That's pretty shady, but this is **true**: "You were knit together in your mother's womb and you were wonderfully and fearfully made" (Psalm 139).

The Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus died so that you could live. If you are in some denial—building your feeble empire— or if you are in relapse—dulling the pain and drowning out the whispers— come back, come and reach out to Jesus. It's not an easy thing to do. It wasn't for Peter, but if you do you will find what you're looking for deep down. You will find healing, you will find hope, you will find life. You will be filled with the tender and powerful love of the Father.

Thanks be to God. Amen.