

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Year A

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Text: Mark 14:53, 55, 61-68, 70-72

Title: “24 Hours that Changed the World: Condemned by the Righteous”

When Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion*, came out you may recall there were all kinds of warnings issued about it. Graphic! Bloody! Anti-semitic! Disturbing! It was suggested to me this last week that we begin the service with a clip of the trial Jesus faced from that movie, but when I viewed it on Youtube, I thought it inappropriate for children and chose not to use it. But when it came out in the theaters our son was 13 or 14 and he wanted to see it. So did his friend, Tom. So I took them to see it, and I don’t think I’ve looked at this story the same ever since. Let’s listen to how the Gospel According to Mark tells it:

53 They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.

55 Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none.

61 But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” 62 Jesus said, “I am; and

‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

63 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? 64 You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death. 65 Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” The guards also took him over and beat him.

66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. 67 When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared

at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” 68 But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed.

70 But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.” 71 But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” 72 At that moment 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.

We know, of course, from the beginning that this is all a set up. The powers that be have already decided what they want to do with Jesus. There have been threats made throughout the Gospel accounts. We know what’s coming here and as a result it may leave us unaffected really. We’re on the other side of it, after all, and we know the end of the story.

Consider, however, that this night is a night of Jesus with his friends, the people who are closest to him, people like your friends and mine. It’s a night of—perhaps--his staunchest supporter pledging his life--if that’s what it took--and all the others in the group signing on to that pledge.

After that pledge of allegiance--as we explored last Sunday, he took them to Gethsemane, asked them to stay awake while he went off to pray. Three times, according to Mark’s Gospel, he came back from praying and found them sleeping as he agonized just a few yards away, pleading with God to free him from this responsibility. But God was silent to Jesus’ pleadings or at least the Gospel accounts say nothing of God’s response to Jesus’ pleadings.

The third time he returns to the sleepy disciples--his closest friends--his mind is made up about what needs to happen as his betrayer stands with a crowd sent by the religious people, the righteous people: chief priests, scribes and elders. These are the church goers, the people known for their religious practices, the leaders of the communities of faith, those concerned to pass on the religious practice from generation to generation. These are the people who take their religion seriously. They are concerned that their way of life and their way of sharing their heritage survives.

As some in the righteous crowd hold their hands on the hilts of their swords like old west gun-fighters awaiting a duel and others making ready with their night-sticks like riot police preparing to defend themselves against a mob rush, Judas kisses Jesus on the cheek. The kiss launches the arrest as the armed guards take a hold of Jesus and someone near—only John’s Gospel says it was Peter—pulled a sword and cut off the ear of one of the servants of the high priest. Only the Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus healed him after he denounces any violent response on the part of his followers.

Jesus marvels at this threatening crowd coming to take him by force of arms as if it would be necessary to take a man who never—as far as we know--threatened anyone with personal violence in order to impose his will, never—as far as we know—held a sword to force his point of view, never suggested that organized violence was the only and best way to bring about the kingdom of God, never used his power or position to demean or injure anyone who was vulnerable and had little power. IN fact, quite in contrast to the use of force, Jesus taught in public, healed in public, forgave in public, fed in public, preached Good News in public all

without threatening violence, all without the use of weapons. The only weapons—if they can be called such—were speech and action expressed in caring for the least of these and the lost and challenging the judgments of the powerful.

It was the powerful that sent the crowd to take him by force. It was the powerful who so effectively sent waves of fear through their approach to Jesus that the best friends cut and ran, leaving him alone. The threatening crowd is aligned against him. The friends are not against him but do not have the strength to stand with him, and the trial to which he is being taken is organized by the righteous and religious people who themselves are afraid: afraid of Jesus', which is why, presumably, they brandish their swords and clubs.

Fear, of course, can quickly turn to anger. They are so afraid of him that they find themselves using violence against a non-violent man in order to protect themselves, their way of life and—ostensibly—their people. Jesus stands alone. In the face of this threatening crowd, Jesus stands alone. In the total abandonment of his friends, Jesus stands alone. The one who is the embodiment of the kingdom of God stands there as night sticks and swords are waved thinking they have the upper hand, that they have the real power. With enough force and violence, they seem to think anyone can be denied whatever it is they stand for.

So they manhandle Jesus. Take him by force with their clubs and swords. If they had .45's or tazers back then I expect they'd be out of their holsters threatening him not to run or else. He is dragged into a courtroom of sorts. It's impressive. No expense spared in building the place. Here he's faced by all the religious leaders. Here it's clear his trial begins. And though the witnesses present make accusations, there really is nothing that sticks, nothing the high priest can hang his hat on and make a pronouncement, nothing serious enough to put this non-violent teacher, healer and preacher to death. Nothing. Here again, Jesus stands alone. There is no one there to rescue him. No one—as far as we know—to stand up for him and protect him. There is no one and so he stands alone facing the fear and anger of the religious people who cannot see that he stands as the One who embodies the kingdom of God and that their fear and anger against him is actually a rejection of who God really is and of what the kingdom of God looks like through Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus stands in stark contrast to the fear and anger of the religious establishment and those involved in it, and they hate him for it. And when the high priest asks him if he has a response to the trumped up charges, Jesus says nothing. He stands alone and says nothing, allowing the silence to reveal God's judgment against them as they continue their quest to reject who he is and therefore who God is.

A young boy makes his way to the refrigerator and retrieves two apple juice bottles, then goes to the cupboard and pulls a couple of Twinkies out of the box. He loads them into his backpack, puts on a windbreaker and his mother asks him where he's going.

"I'm going to find God," he tells her.

"Okay," she says. "Dinner is at 6. Don't be late."

The boy walks down the sidewalk, makes his way into the city taking a bus and then a train. Walking and searching he sees a woman sitting on a park bench. By all appearances she looks the part of a homeless person. Garbage bag full of stuff. Disheveled. Tattered clothes. The boy sits a few feet away from her, pulls out his package of Twinkies. Opens it up and is about to take his first bite when he looks over at her and hands it to her instead. They both enjoy a Twinkie as they talk and laugh. When the eating is over he reaches in his backpack and pulls out an apple juice. Gives it to her. They each wash down their Twinkie lunch. He looks at his watch and remembered his mother telling him to be on time, so he tells his friend, "Gotta go!" Zips up his

pack and then gives her a hug as she smiles in gratitude for the gift he has given her. He makes his way down the sidewalk, turns, and waves.

When he gets home his mother asks him:

“Did you find him?”

“God is a woman, Mom, and she has the most beautiful smile you’ve ever seen!”

The woman on the bench takes a walk, too. She finds a friend holding her sign “Need money for food.” The sign holder asks her why she was in such a good mood.

“I just ate Twinkies in the park with God,” she says. “He’s much younger than I expected.”

How often does Jesus stand before us and we don’t see him for who he is? How often has Jesus stood in the guise of someone who challenges us with the radical way of Jesus who refused to use force to make us conscious of God?

As Jesus faces his farce of a trial inside, outside Peter is lurking in the shadows. You have to give him credit. He could have cut and run along with the others and stayed so far removed from Jesus that no one could have accused him; but he didn’t. He followed along, maybe weighing whether or not he could fulfill his pledge of allegiance, maybe wanting to see if Jesus would pull off some kind of miracle and get himself out of this intense force of anger that swept him and the other disciples away from Jesus.

Yet, what Peter does here is to cozy up with the culture of hate and violence against Jesus. He’s warming himself by the fire along with those who are also separated from Jesus. He’s really not much different from anyone else in the crowd now. Not really. And if there is any doubt about that, consider when he is accused of knowing the guy inside whose being grilled and pressured to defend himself. Twice a young girl says she knows he is one of his friends. Guilt by association. Peter’s fate would be caught up in Jesus’ fate if he confessed that yes, he is one of his friends, one of those who witnessed his healing, whose soul was fed and healed by his teaching, who saw for himself--through Jesus hands and words--the gift of acceptance and forgiveness for those the religious people would never accept or love or embrace as God’s children. Peter could have confessed all of this when this young girl accused him of being one of his followers, but the force of fear overpowered him and he denied it.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Cock crow number one.

This last week I heard former Secretary of State James Baker being interviewed on CBS This Morning. All he had to do was speak a few sentences for me to guess he was from Texas. “Houston,” he said. We have a neighbor who was born and raised in the Bronx of New York. Vick doesn’t have to speak long before you know he isn’t from around here. Maybe the first two denials was all it took for the crowd to pick up that Peter wasn’t from around there either. Not a Texan or a New Yorker but a Galilean. A third accusation resulted in listening to his voice: “You’ve got to be one of them. You’ve got ‘Galilean’ written all over you.” As Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* has it:

<sup>71-72</sup> Now Peter got really nervous and swore, "I never laid eyes on this man you're talking about." Just then the rooster crowed a second time. Peter remembered how Jesus had said, "Before a rooster crows twice, you'll deny me three times." He collapsed in tears.

In Gibson's film, it's here that Jesus, beaten and fallen to the ground, raises his eyes and meets Peter's so there is no mistake that Jesus heard it.

Cock crow number two.

Jesus really is all alone in this. He alone is the presence of God in this drama. He alone reveals who God is as he is beaten, accused, condemned and beaten some more. This is who God is. This is what the power of God looks like and lest we think this is a story of the failure of the religious institution alone or of Peter and the disciples of long ago alone, consider that we warm ourselves by the fire and deny we know the beaten One whenever self-preservation overpowers our allegiance to Jesus as the One present in the least of these, when we are so afraid that we protect our own self-interests first above everything else and anyone else. We, along with Peter, have denied him whenever the fear of self-preservation overwhelms any pledge of allegiance we may have offered. As long as we preserve our lives, our comforts--above all else--we stand with Peter by the fire.

One commentator asked the questions:

It is while we are all busy warming ourselves that the greatest injustices occur. What has gone on behind our back while we've been keeping our faces to the fire?

Were we warming ourselves when a crack house opened up a few streets away? Did we respond only by buying new locks and a high-tech security system?

Were we warming ourselves when the church needed people to help on the nights the doors were opened to the homeless for food and shelter? Did we respond by staying home?

Were we warming ourselves when the school board begged people to support the desperately needed new budget? Did we even vote?

We share Peter's failure of nerve and betrayal as we gather more tightly around our own little fires. We would rather let injustices multiply, neighborhoods decline, innocent people suffer, than put ourselves at risk.

In all of this, the religious authorities were afraid of who he was so they condemned him. His friends and closest followers abandoned him because they were afraid of the consequences resulting from fulfilling the pledge of allegiance to him. Jesus stands alone as the One who revealed the power of God in radical contrast to the kind of power we think is power, the kind of power that thinks it can force itself on someone—anyone it chooses really, the kind of power that

puts self-preservation above anything else and anyone else, the kind of power that belongs to this world but NOT in God's Kingdom. God's kingdom is embodied in the One with the bloodied lip and the soon-to-be-body hanging on the cross. This is the power of God's kingdom: losing one's life in order to save it. It's the kind of power with which we still struggle to understand and embrace because--like the righteous religious authorities and like the well-intentioned Peter and the other disciples--we, too, are human beings with fearFULL instincts that drive us to self-preservation .

Has the cock crowed twice for you and for me? Maybe, just maybe, it's time to pick up some Twinkies and a couple of bottles of apple juice and go searching for God.