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Matthew 26:30-35
JESUS, PETER, AND ME: IT'S ALL ABOUT PRIDE

INI

Have you ever watched the television show Family Feud? There's a pretty good chance that you have since it's been on in one form or another for almost fifty years. It's pretty simple. People are asked a question and families have to guess the top five or six answers. What is your first response to this question: "Besides Jesus, name someone in the New Testament?" There might be a number of answers: Mary, Joseph, Pontius Pilate, Mary Magdalene, Paul, John, and a few others. I would guess that the number one or two answer would be Peter. Peter is a very familiar disciple. He is the one disciple who usually speaks for the rest of the group. The Scriptures do not record a single word of Thaddeus, or James, son of Alphaeus, or Simon the Zealot, but there are many words of Peter that are recorded. There are probably a number of words that Peter did not want recorded because he said something very stupid, talking before thinking. He did that many times.

We are going to take the Lenten journey with Peter this year as we go to Calvary to see our Lord Jesus take the sin of the world upon himself and suffer and die for those sins. Peter would be the first to admit that our Lord Jesus took his sins to the cross and we will see those sins. But as we study the story of Peter, we see that his sins were not unique to him. Every single one of the sins we will study this Lenten season are found in every single one of us. We will walk in Peter's sandals this year. We will see our need for repentance, renewal, and forgiveness. Follow this evening as we see JESUS, PETER, AND ME: IT'S ALL ABOUT PRIDE!

So often when people think about sins, they describe them as bad things that some people occasionally do. When we look at Peter during Holy Week, we see that he stumbles and falls over and over again. Most of the things that Jesus did that week went way over his head. Peter got into a dispute over which of the disciples was considered greatest in the Kingdom of God. He boasted loudly that he would never leave his Lord. When Jesus asked him to watch and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter fell asleep. When the mob arrived, Peter cut off the ear of the servant to the High Priest. He abandoned Jesus to the mob in the Garden. He then followed to the courtyard of the High Priest where he denied knowing Jesus three times. He seems to be nowhere near the scene of the crucifixion. He refused to believe the women's report that Jesus was risen on Easter Sunday. And that was just one week! Not a very good one for Peter.

Sadly, we have weeks like that as well. We fail our Lord, our family, our friends, and ourselves in every way imaginable. We don't even know why. We just mess up and we keep compounding it, getting ourselves in deeper and deeper. We truly need our Lord's love and forgiveness. Why do we keep getting in trouble? If we asked Peter, he just might tell us that it's because of pride.

Jesus and the apostles have just celebrated the Passover meal. They are heading out to the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem. Jesus gives an ominous warning: "This very night you will all fall away because of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" Now Peter knows that won't happen. He boldly tells Jesus, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." There is one person that you can always count on, Jesus, and you know who it is. It's me, the original Rocky. Don't worry, I'll be there for you.

You have to marvel at such confidence, don't you? Peter knew that he was strong. Peter knew that he would be there when Jesus needed a friend. He had a strong faith, or did he? As we look at Peter, we are going to see very little

reliance on God and on God's power. Peter was putting all his trust in himself. What Peter was showing was not faith. It was overconfidence, conceit, and pride. Peter truly could see the other apostles falling away. He could tick them off in his own mind. After all, he had been in enough arguments with them to know them well. He could see James and John, the sons of thunder, Matthew, the former tax collector, Thomas the doubter, maybe even his own brother Andrew. But Peter could never see himself denying or forsaking Jesus. In his own mind, it would be impossible.

Jesus' warning to Peter would become even more explicit. "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." Peter would show Jesus how mistaken he was. "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."

I'm sure that if you asked Peter if he was a sinner, he would have said, "Of course I am." His language probably got a little salty, and sometimes more than a little salty when he was out on the lake fishing and hadn't caught anything. He knew that he shouldn't get into it with the other apostles all the time, but they kept pushing his buttons. The first time Jesus had brought a miraculous catch of fish, Peter knew he was in the presence of God and exclaimed: "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." And he meant that from the bottom of his heart.

But Peter observed "real sinners." Some were Jews and some were Gentiles. Peter wasn't like them. Jesus had given him the name Peter which means "Rock." Peter like that name. He thought that it fit quite nicely. Jesus seemed to like Peter. Peter got to witness the raising of the daughter of Jairus and the transfiguration of our Lord. Oh, it was fun telling the other nine apostles what they had missed seeing. And then there was that time on the Sea of Galilee. All right, so Peter kind of messed up and sank in the water, but he was still one of only two people in history who ever walked on water. That had to count for something.

Generally speaking, Peter felt pretty good about himself. He didn't really see any skeletons in his closet, no real blemishes on his reputation. He just couldn't see himself falling away from Jesus. In his mind, there was no way that Jesus' words concerning him could come true, even if Jesus was the Son of God. Yes, Peter had a real issue with pride.

The Scriptures speak of pride often. King Solomon said, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." Our Gospel lesson this evening tells us about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee prayed about himself. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men. Look at me. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." What did Jesus say about this fine, upstanding citizen? "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled." St. Paul spoke to the Corinthians, "If you think that you are standing firm, be careful that you do not fall."

It is said that the sin that brought Satan down was pride. He wanted to be equal to or superior to God. He tries to get people to think that they are superior to others. He wants you to pridefully believe that there are sins that are impossible for you to commit. You have to remember that Satan is first of all, the Tempter. He will try to lead you into sin. When you do sin, committing the sin that you thought that you could never commit, he then becomes the Accuser, telling you that God will never forgive you for this one. We never want to give Satan a challenge. He loves it when we do.

Sadly, we have all fallen into the sin of pride. We overestimate ourselves, our abilities, our faith, and our wisdom. We underestimate Satan and his cunning. If Satan could get Adam and Eve to doubt God in a perfect world, why should we think that we would fare much better in a sinful one? There is no sin that is not possible for me to commit. Say that to yourself. There is no sin that is not possible for me to commit. You may not see yourself committing certain sins, but don't ever say that it isn't possible. That's pride speaking.

The antidote to pride and every other sin is also here in our text. "But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." The shepherd will be stricken, and the sheep will be scattered, but this is no ordinary shepherd. This is the

Good Shepherd who gives up his life for the sheep. He is the shepherd who leads and feeds, guides, and guards those he loves. The wonderful news is that he loves us, sheep who love to wander.

Peter wasn't the only one to fall prey to pride that evening. We hear that all the other disciples said the same. They were all guilty of the sin that Peter fell into. They were all prideful, yet they all ran away, they all hid, they all were skeptical of the resurrection report. And Jesus would still say to them, "Peace be with you!" This is truly amazing as we see Jesus' love for his prideful sheep. That same amazing love extends to you.

When we look to the cross where our Savior died, we see a lot of sins of pride that were placed on Jesus. We all have many of them. He took those sins gladly and paid for every one of them. In a few minutes, we will corporately confess our sins. You have a few moments of silence for reflection and self-examination. You have the opportunity to think of some of your past sins of pride that are now washed clean in Jesus' holy, precious blood.

Repentance is not just knowing our sin. It is knowing Christ. We hear the words of Holy Absolution, "As a called an ordained servant of Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And then we get to come to the altar and Jesus will personally assure you of the fact that your sins are forgiven. "This is my body which is given for you. This is my blood of the New Testament which is shed for you."

The Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep now gives his life to the sheep. Your sins of pride and all other sins are forgiven. You have the opportunity to show love to all the other sheep out there, knowing what our shepherd has done for you.

This is the story of Jesus, Peter, and each of us. AMEN.

INI

Semper paratus! Always be prepared! That is the motto of the United States Coast Guard and many other organizations. It is a good motto for anyone. Are you prepared for anything? What would you do if our community was flooded? What would you do if you had a flat tire or two from our Michigan potholes? What would you do if you lost your job tomorrow? What would you do if your doctor told you that you had cancer? What would you do if your house was on fire? I pray that those things don't happen to you or to anyone in our congregation, but they could happen. There are many things that could happen. Are you prepared for them? The television news and newspapers will often run articles on preparedness. When a major snowstorm is coming, they will try to warn people to get ready a day or so in advance. Make sure that you have adequate food and water, blankets, and other supplies. Have a shovel in the driveway and another one in your car in case you get stuck. Make sure that you have a hat, gloves, and boots.

Some will choose to listen to the warnings and prepare themselves. Others will be complacent and ignore the warnings. They sadly suffer the consequences. Our nation was caught off guard at Pearl Harbor and on 9/11. As a country, we cannot let such a thing happen again. There are many people who are prepared for many things. There are also many who are prepared for nothing. Sadly, so much of that falls into the spiritual realm. There are many people who have absolutely no idea of what happens when we die, and they don't care! There are many people who could care less about spiritual matters. They don't care about God, about his Son Jesus, about heaven or hell or anything else. They are merely complacent.

We live in a world where Satan will do everything he can to lead us into sin and despair. Last Sunday we went into the wilderness with our Lord where Satan threw everything he had at Jesus, trying to lead him into sin. He will surely try to do the same with us. As Jesus would go to the cross, he would go alone. He had to go alone. The disciples would make sure of that as they would all desert their master and run away. Jesus had warned them. They ignored his warnings. They became complacent. They thought that everything was fine. They didn't have to do anything more. They would ignore our Lord's warnings.

We continue our journey with Peter, the leader of the apostles. Sadly, Peter would look like anything but a leader. Earlier that evening Jesus had told Peter, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." Peter was very familiar with our Lord's omniscience. Jesus knew everything. Peter saw that time and time again. One might think that Peter would ask his Lord for whatever he needed to avoid this tempting by Satan. But as you remember, Peter was filled with pride. He truly believed that he would not nor could ever forsake his Lord. He felt that he was strong enough. He was satisfied. He was complacent. Follow to the Garden of Gethsemane this evening and see that IT'S ALL ABOUT COMPLACENCY!

We go to a garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem. It was a place that Jesus and his disciples had often visited. It was a quiet place with olive trees. It was called Gethsemane which means "oil press." This was the place where Jesus would engage in prayer so strenuous that he would perspire blood. He would be engaged in prayer with his heavenly Father, but Satan was there as well, urging him to forsake his mission. He would seek the presence and comfort of his disciples, his friends, those who spent the last three and a half years with him, listening to his sermons, teachings, and witnessing his miraculous signs. As a human being, Jesus valued friendship and companionship. But he was concerned for their souls as well. This was a night when darkness would reign. Jesus would say, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation." He wants them to be prepared for what was coming. He does not want them to lose their faith under Satan's onslaughts.

“Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?’” This would happen two more times.

Jesus would address Peter specifically. Peter was the one, above all, who was warned repeatedly by our Lord. Remember last week as Jesus told Peter that he would desert and disown Jesus. Peter said that it would never happen. He pridefully believed that such a thing could never happen to him. Peter didn’t look to God for the strength that he needed at this time. He looked inwardly to himself. He felt that he was strong enough. You would think that he would be especially watchful after all of Jesus’ warnings. Peter doesn’t see any danger. We’re just going to Gethsemane. We’ve been there many times before. What kind of thing is going to happen there? It’s a quiet and boring place. Peter was complacent. He was satisfied with his preparation for the evening and for whatever might come.

Jesus told Peter, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” Think of what Jesus was facing. The hour was here. It was time for God’s plan of salvation to come to fruition. The cup was in front of Jesus. That cup was the sin of the world. Think of every vile, foul-smelling substance you could imagine. It has all been blended into one gigantic cocktail. You are not merely to take a sip, but you are to drink and consume every last drop. There are sins so vile, that we cannot begin to imagine them. Sometimes we read about things, and we wonder what kind of monsters could do such horrible things. We can’t even finish the story. We begin to cry as we see these horrible sins. Jesus is going to drink the cup of his Father’s wrath upon sin. Just the thought of it brings sorrow to his face. He is going to have to take that sin and guilt and he is going to have to take God’s punishment for it.

Jesus had to endure this. Jesus had to go it alone. He had told the apostles the divine necessity of his suffering and death. “The Son of Man must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” He would drink the cup that was given to him. But even in this hour of need and sorrow, Jesus was concerned about the apostles. Satan was surely at work that evening. He had already entered into Judas, leading the former apostle to betray his master. Satan would never be content with only one trophy that evening. He wanted it all. He wanted Matthew and Thomas, Philip and Bartholomew, James and John and Peter. He especially wanted Peter. No other apostle experienced such highs and lows. Some, you might say, ran on a pretty even keel, but Peter? Oh, Peter was the prize. If Satan could get Peter to fall, Peter’s despair and depression might lead him to all kinds of wonderful things.

How about you? Are you alert and watchful? Are you thinking that you could never become complacent and satisfied? Our Lenten devotions are one more thing to fortify you in your daily life. We have opportunities for worship every Sunday and special services. We have devotional materials available for home reading. We strongly encourage Bible reading and prayer. We urge you to come to the Sacrament often, every time it is offered. Many see no need for such things. They may show up on Easter, Christmas, or an occasional Sunday, but don’t bother them now. There are places to go, people to meet, things to do. They fall asleep. They doze off and are caught completely unaware.

It usually doesn’t happen overnight. Satan gradually convinces us that we are strong enough to stand on our own in a world that hates Christ and his people. Like Peter, we become complacent.

Think of what the apostles missed. Just as Satan tempted our Lord in the wilderness to forsake the cross and take his kingdom now without suffering and death, so he repeated that temptation. Who of us wouldn’t want that horrible cup to pass us by? Who of us would want to drink that cup of God’s wrath, taking every sin committed by ever sinner into our own body? Yet Jesus would resign himself to his Father’s will. His prayer would be answered. God’s will is

done. Jesus would go out to meet his betrayer, and everything is set into motion. It would end in death and burial and that is what had to happen.

None of us was there to witness the agony of Gethsemane that evening. We can only imagine what it was like. What amazing love Jesus had for you in accepting his fate, taking on your sins, and journeying to the cross. He did that in spite of your complacency and pride. He did it to take your sin away from you forever, to drown it in the depths of the sea. As the apostle Paul tells us, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." Jesus was already assured of victory in the garden. He would go out to meet Judas and the Sanhedrin and Satan. He would do it alone.

Complacency got the better of Peter. He simply slept when he should have been on guard. You know all too well those moments in your own life when you have responded in the same way. Your spirit is willing, but your flesh is weak, all too weak. That is why you need Word and Sacrament, not merely occasionally, but always. Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.

This is the story of Jesus, Peter, and each of us. AMEN.

John 18:1-11

JESUS, PETER, AND ME: IT'S ALL ABOUT MISUNDERSTANDING

INI

Misunderstanding can be a horrible thing. All of us have fallen prey to misunderstanding many times in our lives. We don't always listen well. Some people don't explain themselves as well as they should. We sometimes hear what we want to hear rather than what is actually being said. Some words and phrases can be taken a number of ways, and we interpreted the wrong way. There are all kinds of ways that misunderstanding can be a stumbling block for us. We might miss studying for an important test because we thought that the test was the next day rather than today. We might think that a girl's friendliness really means "I want to go out with you," when it doesn't. Sometimes misunderstandings can lead to the loss of friends or cause a rift in the family that may not be healed for many years. The greatest danger of all is that misunderstanding can destroy you spiritually.

Satan loves to mislead people. He will take God's Word and turn it and twist it so that people really don't know what it means. He did that in the very beginning. "Eve, did God really say that you shouldn't eat the fruit from that tree? Are you sure that you understood him correctly?" We know what happened then and we know what happens today. People fall prey to cults and other religions. I always think back a number of years to the Rev. James Jones in Guyana who led his followers to mass suicide by drinking Kool-aid laced with poison. What would lead people to follow a man like him or Hitler or Stalin or Putin? Satan will use doubt and misunderstanding to destroy people, laughing as they find their way to hell.

Tonight, we continue our Lenten journey. JESUS, PETER, AND ME: IT'S ALL ABOUT MISUNDERSTANDING. We see the misunderstanding on the part of Peter and the other apostles. We see how people today, including us, fall prey to the same misunderstanding.

Last week we were in the Garden of Gethsemane. Peter had already proudly spoken that it would be humanly impossible for him to ever fall away from Jesus. He became complacent in his faith and fell asleep as Jesus asked him to watch and pray so that he would not fall into temptation. He fell asleep three times. The time had now come. The hour was at hand for God's plan of salvation.

Jesus and his disciples had gone to the Garden of Gethsemane a number of times when they went to Jerusalem. Jesus spent so much time engaging in prayer. Gethsemane was a secluded spot. Jesus' disciple Judas knew Jesus' habits well. He had already agreed to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Judas led a group of people which included Roman soldiers, temple police, members of the Sanhedrin, Pharisees, and probably some curious bystanders. They were carrying torches, swords, and clubs. One might ask, "Why were so many people armed to arrest just one man?" There could be a number of reasons. Jesus' miracles were well-known by his enemies. They didn't believe that he was the Son of God, but they certainly could not deny his cleansing of the lepers, feeding of the 5000, giving sight to the blind man, and raising Lazarus from the dead, among others. They wanted to be well prepared. Secondly, they did not know how many people would be with Jesus. They truly underestimated the crowds flocking to him on Palm Sunday. They did not want to make the same mistake again.

Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, a sign of love and friendship. It was the ultimate betrayal. They did want to get it right. They did not want to arrest the wrong man. Even with their torches and lanterns, people might look different in the moonlight. They didn't want to accidentally arrest the wrong man while Jesus fled. Jesus would make it easy, or would he? He asked, "Who is it you want?" They replied, "Jesus of Nazareth." He replied, "I am he!" At that, they fell to the ground. Armed men are struck down by an unarmed man showing his divine power. They could not arrest Jesus if he did not cooperate. He would willingly let himself be arrested so that he could bring about the salvation of the world. He would submit willingly and voluntarily.

Jesus tells them, "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." Jesus would go just as it was foretold in the Scriptures and foretold by our Savior earlier that evening. It would happen exactly as it had to be. But now, here comes Peter to save the day, or so he thought. He shook off his sleep and now draws his sword. Once again acting without thinking, he strikes and cuts off the ear of the servant of the high priest, a man named Malchus.

What was Peter thinking at that time? There were many things going through his mind, no doubt. How could this be? How could one of Jesus' own disciples betray him? This was a man that Peter and the other apostles had known and trusted for three years. They had even made him treasurer of the group. Peter thought of what had happened on Sunday, just five days ago. There was the huge throng of people who had followed them to Jerusalem for the Passover festival and there was the other crowd that came out from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives to meet them. They were spreading their cloaks on the ground. They were waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Yes, they accepted Jesus as their king, and you know what that means! There will be a kingdom and thrones and wealth and power and honor and positions of authority. Who would Jesus put into those positions of authority? Let's see. Who was with him for the past three years? Who was there for Jesus when he needed them? Well, Peter was, sometimes. But who else would Jesus pick but the Twelve? Time and time again they got into arguments as to which of them was the greatest. No doubt they were jockeying for positions of authority: secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, attorney general, and others. James and John had already tried to pull a fast one by having their mother, Jesus' aunt, ask him about positions for her sons. The other apostles were enraged, not because James and John had thought of such a thing, but rather because they had thought of it first.

Peter badly misunderstood Jesus' mission. When the people wanted to make Jesus their bread king, Jesus went away by himself on a mountain. It wasn't that Jesus didn't tell them. They didn't want to listen. They had their own ideas of what a Messiah was supposed to be. The prevailing opinion in Palestine was that the Messiah would be an earthly king who would destroy the Roman armies occupying their land and return the kingdom to the glory days of David and Solomon when the entire world knew who Israel was. If Peter had been paying attention, he would have known what was happening.

Very simply, Peter wasn't paying attention because he didn't want to pay attention. It didn't matter what Jesus said about his mission to suffer, die, and rise again because Peter had a better plan than God. Maybe it had nothing to do with taking away the sin of the world. Maybe it had nothing to do with destroying the power of death forever. Maybe it had nothing to do with crushing the head of Satan. In his own mind, Peter had a better plan.

Admit it! You have had other plans as well. You didn't like Jesus' plan. It wasn't your top priority. Perhaps Number One would be getting things for you, things like money, fame, power, glory, things. You see Jesus as the source of material blessings. You see him as Santa Claus. You're really not concerned about your sins. You admit that you are a sinner, but you're really not troubled by your sins. You don't see yourself as bad as some, even most people. You see yourself as pretty good. You feel that you deserve some blessings, and you think that it's high time that Jesus gave you what you deserve.

Maybe you view Jesus like an insurance policy. When you are old and on your death bed, you'll be happy that he is around, but right now, you have things to do, places to go, people to meet. You don't have time for church or even a few minutes for prayer. You don't see Jesus as your Lord, in charge of your life today. You are the master of your fate. You will live your life now the way you want to live it.

Maybe you see the church as some kind of status symbol. There are those churches that have famous members: doctors, lawyers, judges, athletes, musicians, and others. It is good for your business to tell people that you are a member of that church. Perhaps you see the church only as a place to be hatched, matched, and dispatched.

These are only a few ways that Jesus and his mission are misunderstood. He came to be your Savior and he came to be your Lord. He came to live for you, to die for you, and to rise for you. He came to set you free from your slavery to sin death, and the power of Satan and he came to set you free for a life of service to him, expressed in your love for your neighbor. He came to forgive you your trespasses and gives you the power to forgive those who trespass against you.

He came to seek and to save the lost. He knew his mission. He would not let anything deter him from carrying it out. He would not let Peter's misunderstanding prevent him from doing what had to be done. "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" Let Judas, the mob, the Sanhedrin, and Satan himself think that this was their night of triumph. They were the ones playing into God's hands. Easter would show that so dramatically.

"Let these men go!" Jesus would go to the cross alone, as it had to be. He would take their sin, their punishment, their death. He would be pierced for their transgressions. He would be crushed for their iniquities. The punishment that brought them peace was upon him. By his wounds they would be healed. But those words and actions weren't merely for the apostles who so often misunderstood Jesus' mission. They were meant for you as well. You are forgiven. You have a place in God's family. He gives you the power for everyday living. Rejoice!

This is the story of Jesus, Peter, and each of us. AMEN.

INI

I know that this might come as a great shock to many of you, but I consider myself a sports fan. I especially like my teams here in Detroit: the Tigers, Lions, Pistons, Red Wings and University of Michigan. I watch them on television, and I try to make a couple of games for each of them in person each year. Or at least I used to. It isn't merely that I've had health problems, I just haven't gotten all that excited because they have all been really bad for the last decade or so. They have all taken their turns at being the worst team in their league. We haven't had a lot of playoff games in a long time.

It was real easy to follow the Tigers when they were making the playoffs every year. Most of us remember the Pistons winning three championships and the Red Wings win four Stanley Cups. Everyone was a fan back then, jumping on the bandwagon. But it wasn't funny as our teams were terrible and the late-night comedians were telling jokes about the teams and the city of Detroit every night. You might not want to wear their jersey or hat. You might not want to admit being a fan of a team that's a national laughingstock. You might just want to distance yourself from that team, especially if you are in another state.

Sadly, that is what many people do with Christianity. They claim to be Jesus' disciples, but they want to follow at a distance. They don't want to get too close. They don't want everyone to know that they are Christians, especially if it might cause ridicule or rejection. They are afraid. Fear takes over. This evening we continue our Lenten journey where we will address this problem and see how to overcome it. JESUS, PETER, AND ME: IT'S ALL ABOUT DISTANT DISCIPLESHIP.

We can only imagine what it was like during the second year of Jesus' ministry, the Year of Popularity. Jesus was like a rock star, a great athlete, a world leader, a celebrity. Huge crowds followed him wherever he went. People followed him, and they anticipated where he would go next. Everybody wanted to be with him. Everybody wanted to be his friend. Everybody wanted to see some miracle. Yes, many followed him for all the wrong reasons, but it still had to be exciting. Think about the apostles. They were the ones closest to Jesus. That made them semi-celebrities. Sometimes people try to get closer to the celebrity by becoming friends with someone in his entourage. Were there "Peter groupies" or "John groupies?" Perhaps!

In any case, the apostles enjoyed almost every minute of it. They didn't like going to Jerusalem because they knew that the religious leaders, the Pharisees, and the teachers of the law did not like Jesus, and that was putting it mildly. There was a lot of anger and resentment because Jesus made them look so bad. Opposition was growing there, but things were going pretty well in Galilee. There was even talk about making Jesus king. At that time, you could say that the apostles were pretty fearless in their following, and why not? Wherever Jesus went, good things would follow.

But suddenly, it all changed. They were in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas, one of their own, came with a mob of people and arrested Jesus. They bound him and led him away like a common criminal. Confidence and optimism were shrinking by the second. You could smell the fear. We join up with Peter.

"Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled." Jesus would have to face them alone. He would have to accomplish his Father's plan of salvation alone. That is how it had to be. As Jesus is being led to trial, we see that he is not entirely alone. "But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome." Peter would keep his distance. At this point it was all about distant discipleship.

Notice how each step would lead to something else. First Peter had boasted that he would never fall away from Jesus. Even though Jesus had shown his divine omniscience by foretelling that all the apostles would desert him that very night, Peter's pride denied that it could ever happen to him. Then when Jesus asked him to watch and pray with him in the Garden, Peter fell asleep. Then as the mob arrived, Peter showed how badly he had misunderstood Jesus' mission as he pulled out his sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Now he is following Jesus from a distance. He really does not want anyone to know who he is and his relationship to Jesus.

How closely are you following Jesus these days? Are you right there behind him? If so, how many steps: one, two, fifty? You can still see him up ahead. Don't worry, right? Did you realize that being a Christian isn't exactly popular these days? Most television shows mock Christianity and its stand on abortion, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, Christ being the only way to heaven and many other things. It surely is not easy being a Christian on a college campus. You have professors who mock Christianity, dormitories that encourage sexual experimentation, the desire we all have for social acceptance, Satan's temptations, and the fight we all have with our own sinful flesh.

It's easy to come to church and find other people who share the beliefs you were taught in confirmation class. But in the real world there aren't that many people who believe such things. They seem to be in the majority. And the majority is always right, isn't it? At least it is much more socially acceptable fitting in with the crowd. You like that pretty girl who laughs at how stupid Christians are. What do you do now? You might want to make excuses or see what things are like on the other side. You say that you're still following Jesus. You're just moving back a few steps, hoping to get a clearer view. Or so you believe!

You have to admit that we've had it pretty easy in the United States over our lifetimes. Christianity was not merely tolerated, it was celebrated. Even atheists and agnostics will celebrate some trappings of Christmas and Easter. They may not know the full meaning of these days, but nobody has ever been arrested for celebrating Christmas, the birth of God's Son.

It hasn't been so nice in other countries. Read about the things that Christians in other countries are facing. "Dangerous Places, Pastors on the Run, Lambs among Wolves, the Persecuted Church" are just some of the headlines. North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, India, Indonesia, China, and many other countries are openly hostile to Christianity. Christians are arrested, beaten, tortured, and killed. Many are willing to risk their lives to tell others about Christ. They follow Jesus very closely. Others show a more distant discipleship.

What will you do when persecutions come here to the United States? I believe that persecutions are coming. Political correctness is becoming a tsunami threatening anybody in its wake. Disagreeing with popular opinion will have consequences. Churches and schools will be told to conform or lose their tax-exempt status. Will pastors who refuse to perform gay marriages be arrested for hate crimes? Will those who oppose abortion be labeled "enemies of the state?" If such things could happen in Russia, Germany, China, and many other countries over the last century, how can we believe that it could never happen to us?

Peter was afraid, afraid of what other people might think. Fear is at the heart of our distant discipleship as well, isn't it? We are so afraid of what other people might think of us that we forget what Jesus thinks of us. He endured the rejection and pain of the cross for you. Even though you may have followed him from a distance, he always kept going. He did everything that had to be done at the cost of his own life.

When you are afraid of what it means to be a follower of Christ, think of him. Not only did he take all your sins into his own body and pay the ransom price for them, but he rose again from the dead. He is our living Lord, and no one can harm you! Are we scared of a bunch of people who can hurt us temporarily? We have the one who brought the universe into being by the power of his Word. I love reading Psalm 2. All the enemies of God and his Son have joined together into one great coalition. They will show God who is boss. They will destroy this religion known as Christianity.

They look pretty powerful. People are afraid. What is God's reaction? "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the LORD scoffs at them." God simply laughs. Jesus will destroy them like an iron rod against clay pottery. Just remember that when you are tempted to distant discipleship.

We are weak like Peter. Think of how many times throughout the Scriptures God wants to reassure our fears. "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." That one ought to remind you of your baptism. You were connected with Jesus. He isn't going to forget you or forsake you.

Jesus continues to call us. "Follow me!" That path leads to the cross and the empty tomb. That path leads to victory for now and for all eternity. That path leads you to show love, compassion, and service to others, even those who would hate and hurt you. Jesus had been down this path. It's not uncharted territory. He will be with you to the very end of this age and far beyond.

Peter followed at a distance to see the outcome. No doubt he expected the worst. He would get something far greater than he imagined as the cross and the empty tomb proclaimed that his sins were forgiven, all those sins of weakness including distant discipleship. Those same blessings are there for you: the forgiveness of sins, a new life in Christ and the strength to follow for the rest of your life.

This is the story of Jesus, Peter, and each of us. AMEN

INI

“Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character.” The Apostle Paul spoke these words to the Corinthians. He was quoting the Greek poet Menander whose writings the Corinthians were well acquainted with. Even those who are not Christians know that there are certain people you should strive to avoid. Being near them will get you into trouble. I knew who the naughty boys were when I was in kindergarten. I knew that if I hung around them, I would find myself in trouble sooner or later. I remember when I was twelve. Our family had just moved to a new home in a new subdivision. I didn't have any friends there. One day I saw some boys playing at a new house that was being built. They were playing hide and seek. They let me play with them. I did and went home. The next day the police came to my home. After I left, some of the boys took two by fours and punched holes in the dry wall. I had to convince the police that I was not one of them. I didn't play with those boys again. Many times, people do stupid things with other people and wish that they could go back in time and change the company they kept at that time.

Parents can warn us, teachers can warn us, pastors can warn us, even Jesus can warn us. Yet you know that we don't always listen. We think that we can get closer and closer to a fire and not get burned. Peter thought that way as well. His night was a nightmare already and it was only going to get worse. He had already rebuked Jesus for saying that Peter would deny knowing Jesus that very night. He had fallen asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus invited him to watch and pray. He had cut off the ear of the servant to the high priest and run away as Jesus was arrested. He followed Jesus from afar and now came to the house of the high priest. Peter was not going to get into the house, so he found himself outside in the courtyard of the high priest. Things were going to get worse, much worse. “It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter was also standing with them warming himself.”

We know what was going on inside. Jesus was put on trial. This was all prearranged and planned. It didn't matter what Jesus would say or do. The verdict had already been determined long ago. They would find him worthy of death. They didn't know exactly how they would make it work. They would pay some people to bring charges against him. They would get it all taken care of before the night was over. They would condemn him to death and take him to Pontius Pilate to have him carry out the death sentence. Hopefully, all of this could get done before most of the people were awake the next morning.

Meanwhile, outside there are all kinds of people assembled. No doubt there were many who had been there in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested. There are soldiers and servants and all kinds of unsavory people. They are talking about this Jesus. They captured him pretty easily. There was no miracle, no parlor trick. Some were mocking and ridiculing him already. These were certainly no friends of Jesus. And there was Peter! He finds himself right there with them. He really didn't want to be there with them, but he didn't leave. You could say that he was there for the right reason. He wanted to be with Jesus. But at the same time, he didn't want to be with Jesus. Things were getting uglier by the minute. We know where this is going to end, don't we? Peter has put himself in a bad situation, a dangerous situation.

We've all been there before, haven't we? We know that there are people that we shouldn't be around. We don't want to be in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. There are times when we simply can't avoid it. There are bad people in the world. They live in our cities. Sometimes they can be found where we live, where we work, where we play. We are all part of human society. But there is something else involved. We seek the approval of other people. We want to be admired and liked. Sometimes we are afraid. Sometimes we don't want other people to think that we are chicken. Sometimes we might end up doing something that we wouldn't normally do because of peer pressure.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we go out into the wilderness with our Lord as he battles the temptations of Satan in our stead. Both St. Matthew and St. Luke list the individual temptations in their Gospels. St. Mark simply reports that Jesus was alone with the wild animals. He paints the bleakness of the situation. We think of the dangers of being alone. We think of some of the things that Satan tempted us to do because we thought that we were alone, and no one would ever know.

We also know what it is like being with the wrong crowd. There are people who are not telling us to imitate Christ. It is just the opposite. They want us to be like them. When the boss is gone, they don't work. When it comes to homework for school, they prefer to have someone else do it for them. They don't believe in marriage, or at least faithfulness in marriage. They are known for overindulging: sex, alcohol, drugs, you name it. And sometimes that sounds pretty exciting! It sounds better than our dull, drab, boring, everyday life. We want a little spice. That's where the danger comes in.

I've seen many women who say that they are looking for a good man who will just love them and be a good husband and father. Yet they want a man who has a bit of a dark side, not some boring person. Well, they get that man, and he cheats on her and he beats her, and he shows his dark side. Often, her family and friends could see that right away, yet she wasn't going to listen to anyone.

Bad company doesn't even have to be people, does it? Books, magazines, movies, television, radio, the internet all have place where Christians really should not go. You know those places, yet they can be so tempting, so enticing...

Peter found himself in the wrong place with the wrong people. He was there warming himself by the fire. Things were getting hotter and hotter. We cannot warm ourselves by the fires of the enemies of Christ. These are the fires of hell, and they can consume us.

We see our Savior who was always in the right place at the right time with the right people. He was always in communication with his heavenly Father. He came to do the will of his Father. He came to resist all the temptations of Satan, something we cannot do. He is our true friend. Think of that. He said, "I have called you friends." He said that about the apostles. He said that as they were on their way to Gethsemane where they would all forsake him and run away. He said that about Peter who would find himself with the wrong crowd. Jesus knew what would happen and he still loved them, and he still loves us. "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." That is not only what Jesus said; it is what Jesus did. But let us remember that the friendship only went one way. We were God's enemies and wanted nothing to do with him. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

While we wanted to be off doing what sounds fun and exciting, Jesus would be taking those very sins into his own body and paying the penalty for our guilt and shame. We were there with the crowd, yet Jesus too would be willingly numbered with the transgressors. He was obedient where we were disobedient. He died for our sins so that we do not die in our sins. He took those sins away forever. We are forgiven.

Jesus came to reconcile us to God, to restore the broken relationship that sin had brought. We are part of God's family. We must stand with our family. We live in the world, and there will always be evil influences. We can't stop a bird from flying over our heads, but we can stop the bird from making a nest in our hair.

Sometimes we are blindsided, but other times we know exactly where we are. We know that it is not where we should be. You know that there are people who are hostile to Christianity. They are not seeking truth. They are open enemies of the gospel of Christ. They mock our Lord and blaspheme his name. We have absolutely nothing to gain by

being in their company. Only bad things can result. Stay away from such people. Stay away from those places that cause you to sin. You know your own weaknesses, don't you? Alcoholics shouldn't hang around bars and liquor stores.

So many times, the Scriptures tell us to flee, to run away. Don't stand there. Don't walk away slowly, looking back like Lot's wife in Sodom. Run, run away like Joseph when he was tempted by Potiphar's wife! "Flee from sexual immorality!" If people weren't tempted, they wouldn't have to flee, would they? Paul tells us, "Flee the evil desires of youth!" Sometimes the bravest thing you can do is get out and run for your life. Run as though your eternal soul depended upon it because it does. The world tells you that you can do whatever you want: drink, do drugs, have sex, and do it all in excess. The word tells you that there are no consequences to any of these things. Experiment all you like. There is no guilt, no shame. It's all there for you. The world is lying, isn't it? There are always consequences for our actions. Sometimes they last a lifetime. We can't go back and undo what we have done because we listened to the wrong people.

But Jesus undid what our sins had done. He went to the cross for you. He took all those sins of being in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people along with every other sin to the cross. Peter made the mistake of failing to identify himself as belonging to Jesus. His being with the wrong crowd would lead to his denial of Christ. Don't make that mistake.

Follow the right crowd. Follow our Lord as he calls you to humble service and love as he showed for you. Stay away from those people, places, and situations that can lead you into sin. It's all about the company you keep. May God keep us safe with him!

This is the story of Jesus, Peter, and each of us. AMEN

INI

Golf is an interesting game. It can be a lot of fun. It can also be very frustrating. Every shot counts. Every golfer will make bad shots. I don't care who you are. Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, and every other golfer will make a bad shot now and then. You find yourself behind a tree or in the water. You have to then take your medicine, punch out and go on from there. Sometimes you don't want to do that. Sometimes you think that you can make a spectacular shot and sometimes you do. But for average golfers, you usually don't. You can make it worse, much worse. The twelfth hole at Augusta National is a very short hole. It is only 155 yards. No golfer has ever won the Masters on the twelfth hole, but plenty of golfers have lost it there. The wind is very tricky. There is water in front of the green and trees in the back. Two years ago, Tiger Woods, the greatest golfer of our time, was on the tee. He was three under par at the time. He went into the water three times and took a ten, going to four over par. It was painful to watch. When things start going downhill, it's very hard to stop.

Peter could only wish that his freefall was on the golf course. His was worse, much worse because it involved his best friend who just happened to be Jesus. At the start of the evening, there was no way that Peter would have believed what would ultimately transpire. If Peter were a betting man, he would have bet you a million dollars that there was no way that things would have unfolded that way that they did. Jesus had warned him, but Peter would have none of it. His pride said that there was no way that he would not be loyal to Christ. He fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane, failing to watch and pray. He panicked when the mob arrived to arrest Jesus. Fear led him to flight, but not for long. He followed at a distance, wanting to see the end, whatever that might be. He soon found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people, people hostile to Jesus. Sadly, we know where this is going. Tonight, we take the final step on our midweek Lenten journey with JESUS, PETER, AND ME: IT'S ALL ABOUT DENIAL.

The thing is that Peter's denial came from an entirely unexpected source. If Peter had been confronted by a garrison of Roman soldiers, he may well have gone down fighting for his Lord. He would be a hero. But Satan was much too smart and cunning for that. He would never attack Peter where his strength lay. He would come from an unarmed servant girl who would simply confront him: "This man was with him."

There was a crowd gathered around the fire and most of them as far as Peter could tell were hostile to Jesus. If they were hostile toward Jesus, they would be hostile to him as well. Remember that Peter was alone. The rest of the apostles had run away, and John had gone into the high priest's house. Peter was alone. He was confronted in the presence of many others. He did not have time to think of what to say. He saw only one way out and that was to lie. "Woman, I do not know him."

Up to this point, this girl was perhaps considered a nobody. She was simply there, but she would do something that would attract attention. Did she make the statement out of curiosity or as a joke or out of contempt? We don't know, and it really isn't important what her motive was. She would get Peter on the defensive and he would be reeling! It wouldn't take long and someone else would also say, "You also are one of them!"

It wasn't very long ago that Peter was proud to be "one of them." Remember that expectations were riding high. There were those who certainly thought that Jesus might soon be coming into a kingdom. Peter had witnessed one miraculous sign after another during his three years of discipleship. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been in the grave for four days. Jerusalem was the capital. It certainly would not be out of place for Jesus to be acclaimed as king. They saw the people's reaction on Palm Sunday. Yes, if Jesus was to be acclaimed as king, then the apostles would be trusted cabinet members. Peter was proud to be "one of them."

But not now! Jesus was on trial for his life. Peter knew that hatred that the Pharisees and chief priests had for Jesus. They tried to kill him the last time he was in Jerusalem. Caiphas the high priest cared nothing for spiritual matters. He was only interested in power for himself. This was a whole different matter. One of them? “Man, I am not!”

Now Peter was really backed into a corner. There was something very suspicious about Peter. He didn't talk like everyone else. It was like someone going from Boston into Dallas. His accent was definitely from Galilee up north. Not only that, but Peter didn't have time to change his clothes from Gethsemane. One of the people there was a relative of the high priest's servant whose ear Peter had cut off earlier that evening. Peter's face would be very recognizable. He's surrounded by enemies. There is only one thing he can do. He says, “Man, I don't know what you're talking about!” And he will back up those words by taking an oath and calling down curses upon himself. Peter made his point, very clearly!

We understand very clearly what Peter did, don't we? We understand it because it is so real. Our sermon study is Jesus, Peter, and Me. We all have experienced the same weaknesses and sins of Peter. Like Peter, we get caught off guard. Like Peter, we aren't paying attention and all of a sudden, we fall into sin, and we try to cover it up with another sin. We go into free fall. It's like trying to stop ourselves when we are sliding down a hill of pure ice. Or maybe we don't want to stop it right now!

We deny our Lord both by what we say and by what we fail to say. We deny our Lord both by what we do and by what we fail to do. We have the opportunity to make a confession of our faith. Not only will we not make that confession, but we will join in with those who are denying Christ by their words and actions. “Hey, aren't you a member of that Lutheran Church? You have all those weird ideas that other churches gave up a long time ago.” “Well, I don't let it interfere with my lifestyle. Church members aren't all that goody goody. We're just like everyone else.” We may or may not realize what we're doing, but we are in a whirlpool, getting sucked in deeper and deeper without realizing how dangerous it is.

We say, “yes” to sin, and “no” to Christ. Thank you, Jesus, but I'm not having any of you today. I have other things going on right now, things that I want, things that are exciting. That should be very scary because Jesus has said, “Whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father in heaven.”

Then two things happened. “Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.’” No doubt, Jesus was being led from one part of the high priest's home to another. He turned and looked straight at Peter. At this point his face must have been black and blue from the fists of the members of the Sanhedrin and the guards who took turns punching him. What was in that look? Certainly, it was hurt and disappointment at what Peter had done in spite of Jesus' warning.

But it had to be more than that. If that was the only thing, Peter may have well been driven to the same despair that caused Judas to take his own life that same evening. His only thought would have been: “The Lord has rejected me for my cowardly denial of him. How could he ever want anything to do with a person like me?” But there was something else in that look. We can call it a wonderful look of love. It was a look of love and compassion. That look was Peter's call to repentance and restoration. Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Peter was certainly a sinner. Jesus would take Peter's many sins of that evening and throughout his life upon him and pour out his precious blood for those sins. Peter would graphically learn that there is a new beginning and full and free forgiveness for all who look to him in faith. Yes, Peter is a witness to the fact that the lost can be restored, that sins are forgiven, that the fallen are raised, and that life begins again. Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross and died for Peter and for you and for me. He promised, “Whoever comes to me, I will never cast out.”

Jesus had told Peter, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me." When that rooster crowed that morning, Peter remembered his Savior's warning and went out and wept tears of repentance. That rooster's crow really wouldn't mean that much for most of the people there that early morning other than signaling the coming dawn. For Peter, it held a world of tragic meaning. But it would also signal a new dawn. Peter would be able to leave the night and the darkness of sin and denial to greet the sunlight of God's mercy and grace in Christ.

All would happen as it had to. Jesus would suffer and die for our sins. Peter would be a witness of the risen Christ. Jesus would not only reassure him that he was forgiven, but he would also be fully restored to apostleship. Jesus still had plans for Peter to feed his sheep.

There is much for us to learn from Peter's story. We sadly have denied our Lord many times in our lives. You can think of those times. Sadly, there will still be other times in your life when you fall again into sin. But remember these words spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Hopefully winter and snow are over, but you have to love the look of the new fallen snow covering all the grit and grime that had been there the night before. Christ is that new fallen snow that covers our sins now and forever. We turn to him in repentance and faith.

This is the story of Jesus, Peter, and each of us. AMEN.