**John 13:36-38** February 24, 2021

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Mid-Week Lent #1

*John 13:36Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?”*

*Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.”*

*37Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”*

*38Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!*

***Searching Questions from Lent:* Will You Lay Down Your Life for Me?**

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was good of you to find time this evening to be here. I don’t say that for myself, pleased to see people in the pews. I say that for you. It will be good for you that you are here on the journey to the cross. There are many things you could be doing this evening, even some things that just “gotta get done,” but this is important. You will be blessed by this time with your Lord and Savior.

This evening we journey together to the table where thirteen friends sit. We just heard about it in our Passion History reading. Here Jesus and his core followers enjoy a final meal, the last before Jesus’ death. Just at the end of that special meal, that is where our reading happens.

Just before our reading, Jesus had told them, *“Where I am going, you cannot come”* (33). No one wanted to hear that. But one of them couldn’t let it lie. Peter had to ask the thought that was on everyone’s mind, ***“Lord, where are you going?”*** It seems that he asked innocently enough. Jesus replied, ***“Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.”*** And then Peter said, ***“Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”*** This is where Peter’s problem begins. His problem isn’t that he didn’t want Jesus to leave. His problem starts where Jesus speaks words of Gospel, and that isn’t good enough for Peter.

Do you hear how much there is to be treasured in Jesus’ response? Did you hear the Gospel, ***“Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later”***? Wouldn’t that be a promise you would cling to for the rest of your life: ***“You will follow later”***? You could go through the greatest loss, through the pain of disease, the shame of persecution, and you could always cling to that time Jesus looked in your eye and said, ***“You will follow later.”***

But that is the problem with Peter. He will not let Jesus determine the future. He has a fundamental lack of humility and a failure to understand how dependent he is on God. He has tremendous difficulty letting God be God and realize that our relationship with God is not based on our thinking and choosing, our striving and fighting, but on God taking sinful people by the scruff of the neck, claiming them as his own through Baptism and the Word of God, and then that his strength continues to feed and nourish and course through our spiritual veins. If left to ourselves at any point, we would wither on the vine.

But not Peter; no, not Peter! ***“I will lay down my life for you.”*** He was sure of that. He was so stout in his faith that wild horses couldn’t drag him away. He would throw himself in front of charging cavalry, brandish a weapon, stand between Jesus and death. That was Peter. Others might fall, but not him.

He has forgotten how much every one of us depends on God for life and breath, and for faith and hope. Yes, in Christ, we are empowered to do great and noble things; but *in Christ*, not of ourselves. Peter was stepping out from Christ’s declared will, defying it, saying he would do it one better: ***“I will lay down my life for you.”***

There is more than irony in Jesus’ divine declaration of Peter’s self-prescribed doom ***“Will you lay down your life for me?”*** I don’t imagine the least joy in Jesus’ heart, the least smile on his lips when he said it, but Jesus as much as says, “You will be judged by your own words.” How often has it not happened to you, that at exactly that point you are getting a little high and mighty or a lot high and mighty, that you fall? Lord, have mercy!

Jesus continues, ***“I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!”***

Do you understand about the rooster?

I don’t know what 7:00pm most weeknight nights looks like for you. If you are teenager or a twenty-something, you might just be getting started on the second half of your day. But if you are younger than that, or older than that, especially if you have or have had children, you probably have a routine where by this time of day you are winding down. You might go out to the store, maybe even a high school basketball game, but on a weeknight at 7pm, few hours are left. Soon to bed, because before you know it, the alarm clock will be ringing.

This evening, however, you are in church. Like Peter, you have been reading the Bible, singing hymns, praying. It’s a God-centered evening. How much could go wrong before morning? Who would deny that we can fall into this or that little sin. But could you lose your faith between now and when the alarm clock goes off at 6am? “I doubt it!” right? “I mean, I am a believing person, I’m in church, I’m with a bunch of other Christians. By God’s grace I know what I believe and am convinced of it. I mean, I realize that I need to be careful. Life can be long. I don’t know the trials and temptations that will come to me. Who knows the sorrows? I pray that I stay faithful through it all. But between now and sunrise? I don’t think so!”

Then what are the meaning of Jesus’ words: ***“Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, [before the alarm clock goes off] you will disown me three times!”*** Between this time tonight and your usual wake-up time, Peter, not only will you refuse to die for me, you will disown me. And not only will you disown me, you will do it three times!

Put it in that time frame, seat me with Jesus at a table, I sing several Psalms with the Son of God, knowing that right after this meal we are going to a peaceful little garden spot where we camp out every night and I start to understand why Peter answered Jesus’ words (as recorded in Matthew, but not here in John), *“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”* (26:35). God forbid, maybe something could happen somewhere down the line, but in the next six hours? Are you nuts, Jesus?

Spiritual self-confidence is so dangerous! We imagine that we can stand on our own. We can’t! We underestimate the power and allure of sin. How many a “hero of faith” has fallen and disgraced his and her Savior, just when they looked most heroic! How easy it is to say with a spiritual arrogance like Peter’s “I don’t need to go to church” and then neglect God’s Means of Grace in Word and Sacrament! How often our lack of spiritual humility belittles those who are weaker in faith or more realistic about their limitations.

But here is one really big thing: These very words of Jesus, ***“Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times”*** were not only words of doom, these words were the exact words that Peter remembered right after hearing the rooster’s crow. These words were thing that called him back. When his pride was shown to be the sham that it was, when he saw the truth of Jesus’ words, he realized and returned to his Savior, weeping bitterly, repentant and now trusting him for forgiveness, and only him for strength.

May it be so with us. Dear Lord, keep our ears open. Let us always treasure your Gospel promises. Lead us to trust, not our hold on you, but your hold on us. As we will sing in a few minutes,

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand;   
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night, Lead me on to the light.  
Take my hand, precious Lord; Lead me home. Amen.