

March 4, 2018
Finding Faith in the Negative
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John 18:1-27

[The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus]

18 After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ² Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. ³ So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. ⁴ Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" ⁵ They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. ⁶ When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they stepped back and fell to the ground. ⁷ Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." ⁸ Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." ⁹ This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me." ¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. ¹¹ Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

[Jesus before the High Priest]

¹² So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. ¹³ First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. ¹⁴ Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.

[Peter Denies Jesus]

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶ but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ The woman said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." ¹⁸ Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.

[The High Priest Questions Jesus]

¹⁹ Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. ²⁰ Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing

in secret. ²¹ Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said." ²² When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" ²³ Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" ²⁴ Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

[Peter Denies Jesus Again]

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." ²⁶ One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

This sermon isn't going to end comfortably, because the text doesn't – and because this is Lent, and nothing can be resolved until and unless Jesus has Risen.

Unless Jesus has risen, the only hope available in this world is for the strongest. Unless Jesus has risen, the law of justice has a chance, and we ought not forego it. But the law of justice has many enemies, armed and well-funded. So until and unless Jesus has risen, finally, there is nothing we can do.

This *nothingness* is what Peter struggles against in chapter 18 of John. This is the *negative* I mean, when I say "*finding faith in the negative*": *in the absence, the emptiness, the silence, the powerlessness, the withoutness.*

Regarding words, if your friend or colleague hears you talking about *your church* and says, "Oh, where do you go to church?" and you say, "*I am a member of University Baptist Church,*" do you leave it there, to rest upon the bed of whatever cultural references your friend or colleague has for the word *Baptist*? Or do you feel the slightest urge to say just a little more, to justify exactly your association with the word *Baptist*?

If I say "*Black Lives Matter,*" all of you know I mean more than what the three words *black + lives + matter* each mean on their own. *Black Lives Matter* is loaded with explicit cultural references about which people have strong and profoundly different feelings and opinions.

My Greek professor used to say *words don't have meanings, they have usages.* Words mean what they mean, depending on who is talking – and hearing. And in the gospel of John, no word EVER means just one thing. In John 18, in the dark of night Judas leads an entourage of Jesus' enemies to arrest Him – *the high priest, Pharisees, Temple police and a detachment of soldiers,* John reports – all of them armed and carrying torches and lanterns, as if Jesus would be hard to find and difficult to capture. Lanterns and torches to find the Light of the World; swords and clubs to capture the Prince of Peace.

"Whom are you looking for?" Jesus asks. "Jesus of Nazareth," they say. "I AM," Jesus answers. And they all fall down. Because those aren't just two plain old words pulled out of thin air that don't mean anything but *I* and *AM*. "I AM" is the name God uses in Genesis the first time God introduces God's self to God's enemies. Remember? When Moses is shaking in his boots about talking to the Pharaoh and asks, *who should I say sent me here?* God says, *tell them "I AM" sent you.*

"Whom are you looking for?"

"Jesus of Nazareth."

"I AM."

Can you imagine anything more offensive Jesus might have said? And He planned it. He wanted to say it. It was a set-up. Twice He asked "*Whom are you looking for?*" so twice He can say, I AM! – although John says it three times, which is hugely interesting.

Then Jesus has them let His friends go. "*You have me, let them go.*" Turns out Peter is also armed. He draws his sword and slices off the ear of the high priest's servant.

First of all, gross. Second, don't you know a whole bunch more swords came out really fast at that point? Suddenly, though not surprisingly, Jesus is in charge. "*Everybody just calm down.*" He tells Peter to put his sword away. "*Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?*" More metaphor and innuendo. Jesus isn't talking about drinking anything, is He? The cup is His mission to die and rise, to destroy the power of the law of force. Violence will only hinder His mission.

(Why this verse doesn't end the discussion of bringing guns to church to protect ourselves is beyond me. But it doesn't. Anyway...)

Peter half obeys. He puts away the sword but doesn't go with the other disciples when Jesus dismisses them. He and *the other disciple* (who is assumed to be John) follow the entourage to the high priest's house.

Peter stands outside while Jesus is questioned and beaten inside. Three times Peter is asked by strangers, *Are you not one of his friends?* Three times, Peter answers, "*I am not.*" Jesus says "I Am." Peter says, "I Am Not."

And we are, for the most part, raised to believe that no greater sin can ever be committed by a believer. If asked, we must say we belong to Him – no matter who is asking; no matter the circumstance; no matter the danger. Peter will be forgiven in a few chapters and become the rock, the foundation of the church. And yet, that same church has held fast to this notion of his great failure here in chapter 18.

About these three "*I AM NOTs*" – You've heard of the *flight or fight response*, I'm sure. We are wired with it (by *we* I mean ALL animals). In extreme danger we evaluate our

survival chances and make a quick choice – fight or fly. This moment in the garden is a *fight or flight moment*. Other disciples were glad to fly, but Peter decided to fight.

See, if it weren't the Bible, he'd be a hero – right? Aragorn... Legolas... what did Gandalf say in the mines of Moria? *Fly, you fools!* In other stories Peter would have been the bravest of them all, willing to lay down his life for his friend Jesus. Where would he have gotten that idea??? Still, we have carved out this one scene and marked Peter as the coward we would never be.

But even when Jesus shut him down, Peter doesn't retreat. He may be stubborn and disobedient, but I don't think he's a coward. That doesn't fit the text or what else we know of Peter. So even when Jesus tells him *go*, he stays. John brings Peter into the courtyard.

Pretend you don't know this story. Pretend it is a Netflix original. What are Peter and John up to? They are spies, right? They are looking for a chance to DO something to help their friend and their cause, right? Do good spies out themselves to the enemy? *"Hey, are you a spy?" "Absolutely!"* Of course they don't! Good spies lie. *He who spieth, lieth.* No good thing will come from Peter telling them who he is or what he is doing there.

Could it be he lies for the greater good of rescuing Jesus? We know what Jesus was up to, but Peter didn't. In this moment, Jesus had NOT risen from the dead. Peter is living and acting and trying to be faithful in the negative.

Do you understand what I mean? *In the absence of what he needs to be fully faithful.* He's doing the best he can with what he knows in the moment.

It's what we DON'T know that will ruin us, if we cannot make peace with not knowing it. Peter is acting on what he knows. But he knows too little to be acting at all. He isn't even supposed to be in this courtyard. Jesus told His disciples to go. Peter stayed. I AM, is supposed to be here. I AM NOT, isn't. Are you with me? This is the world where only the law of force can DO anything.

Peter can do nothing – which is precisely what Peter is meant to do: nothing. Faith in that moment consisted of *doing nothing*. If Jesus hasn't risen, there is nothing to be done.

"I AM NOT" is the truest thing Peter could possibly say. Though when he says it, he does not know the truth he speaks. As I was thinking about all this on Thursday, Luke Gillespie wandered in and we talked for an hour. He was hugely helpful with this sermon. He was raised in Japan, you know, and he reminded me of how we westerners are so awkward with the idea and experience of nothingness, of silence and emptiness and space. I'd already been thinking to use this title, *Finding Faith in the Negative*, because Peter is trying to follow Jesus and he REALLY, REALLY wants to DO something. He is ready to DIE to improve or change the situation, should it come to that.

But Jesus has told him "NO" and "GO AWAY" and neither of those feel remotely faithful to him, so he just sort of shuffles along behind, not understanding and not giving up either.

And I wonder if the Western church's own cultural discomfort with the idea of this *nothingness* is what drove us to latch on to Peter's verbal denials as the singular evidence of his betrayal of Jesus and to comfort ourselves with the notion that as long as we never do exactly THAT, we are mostly okay.

But with all due respect to the martyrs everywhere who, in the moment they were asked, died rather than lied (the \$3 seminary word is *apostacized*) I also beg to differ on the meaning of the text itself. I think it safe to say that on any given day, more of us than not deny our association with Jesus Christ in one way or another. The fact that there is no gun to my head or knife at my throat does not relieve me of the duty to claim Him. If I am His, I ought to act like it and talk like it – all the time, amen? Amen.

More to the point, in John 18 Peter does not know Jesus Risen. In John 21 he does, and is forgiven. It's a very strange scene there. The betrayal is mentioned, but mostly Jesus keeps saying *feed my lambs*, which makes it tricky to link back up with this. What if Jesus is forgiving Peter for not knowing what he could not know? for not doing what he wasn't called to do in the first place? for failing to keep faith in the negative space when the only act of faith possible is to trust and sit and not act?

If we were Japanese, that would NOT feel like doing nothing. If we could find it in ourselves to trust Jesus, doing nothing where nothing can be done would come to us as faith. Even here, in Chapter 18, the passion of Jesus is in motion. Peter has everything he needs of Jesus, but he doesn't know it. We DO know it.

We ONLY know Jesus Risen. And think how hard it is for us to trust, on ordinary days! But even more on days when our world is blowing up, like Peter's is blowing up in John 18? When our text ends, a new day has dawned for Peter. He doesn't even know how much worse it's going to get. Another day in which he will have to try and find faith in the empty, the absent, the silent, the waiting spaces of existence.

Would you pray with me?