March 4, 2018 – Lent 3

“Following Jesus to Struggle and Confrontation: Peter’s Denial”

John 18:12-27

This is the 3rd Sunday of Lent, and we are following Jesus to the Cross. We began by following Jesus to Awakening with the raising of Lazarus; and last week we followed Jesus to Receiving. This week we follow Jesus and Peter to struggle and confrontation. Each week, there is a question to reflect upon, and this week’s question is:

***Who or what am I confronting or struggling with/against?***

***Is it easier to deny Christ than to face the struggle?***

Peter’s three-fold denial of Jesus is significant. It isn’t just once, nor twice, but 3 times. This is the Bible telling us “*This is important!”.* John, the Gospel writer, doesn’t tell us why it is important, except that Jesus said to Peter, “*You will deny me three times before the rooster crows*”.

Peter is dealing with struggle and confrontation in this journey to the Cross, and I think Peter is dealing with two important denials here –

1. A denial of time:

A denial of struggles from the past and a confrontation of Peter’s past with Jesus

A denial of the present struggle with authority and of what is actually happening in the present

A denial of the future and confronting the promises of Christ that have been given to Peter

1. And a denial of identity:

Peter’s first denial takes place in verse 17:

*17The woman said to Peter, ‘You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?’ He said, ‘I am not.’*

“*I am not*” is an identity statement, as in “*I am not a Republican/Democrat; I am not an atheist/believer; I am not…”* It is a statement about who we aren’t and what we will not claim. Peter’s “*I am not”* is contrasted with a Gospel full of Jesus making “*I AM”* statements. Jesus says *“I am…”* seven times in John’s Gospel. On Maundy Thursday, we heard Jesus say, *“I am the Good Shepherd”.* On the first Sunday of Lent, we heard him say, *“I am the Resurrection and the Life”.* After he washes the feet of the disciples, Jesus prays a long prayer, and tells the disciples, *“I am the vine and you are the branches”.* These are all identity statements. They are ways for the disciples and for us to orient our deepest self, anchors in the sea of ideas and perceptions that surround us.

In 1996, the political scientist Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) said, in his book *The Clash of Civilizations,* that we are seeing the ‘*eruption of a global identity crisis’*. We no longer have the tools to know who we are in the world. I would say his statement was prophetic, and now we are living through the effects of that global identity crisis. We are all Peter now.

And so I ask you:

*In what ways have you denied the struggles of your past?*

*In what ways are you denying confrontations and struggles that are happening now?*

*In what ways does the future hold the possibility of denying struggles?*

The artist Paul Gaugin put the questions this way:

*Where do we come from?*

*What are we?*

*Where are we going to?*

Peter is in a demanding situation. After three years studying with Jesus, and directly after committing himself wholly to Jesus, he is now confronted with the weight of the struggle ahead. His teacher is arrested by the authorities and is facing treason charges, and execution. That means Jesus’ known associates will face the same thing. The group of disciples he has lived with for these past three years is disintegrating rapidly and was carrying the depth charge of betrayal within their ranks from the very beginning.

Those were hard but invigorating years, but now the struggle begins. Now the confrontation between the truth of Jesus and God, and the powers and authorities of the world begins. In the face of those struggles and confrontations, Peter denies Jesus three separate times, while Jesus is being questioned and struck by the authorities. Peter denies his past relationships with Jesus, his present discipleship with Jesus, and the future promises of Jesus.

In doing so, Peter also denies his identity, who he has become, who he is, and who he is becoming.

Identity, how we think of ourselves in relation to the world and the thoughts we are conscious of, is a strange thing. I think of *identity* as the ideas, beliefs, worldviews, and thoughts we try to orient our lives around. *Identity* is the fabric we use to weave the story we tell about ourselves, how we know *who we are* in relationship to other people and the world. We try to orient our sense of who we are by aligning with identities in the world. And so, I might become aware of an identity in the world that aligns with who I know myself to be.

*I am part Romany, and as I got older I began see that there is an identity that goes with that ethnic heritage.* To not identify with what I know myself to be in relation to my heritage seems weird to me. It is how I know who I am in the world, and it is how I tell my story through time. The same could be said about my Welsh heritage.

My point is simple, though. Who we think we were changes because of who we think we are now*.* And that will change again in the future. We are subject to time and to who we think we are. The past, the present, and the future all change us. The ideas, worldviews, traditions, and thoughts we identify with are attempts to stabilize the ever-changing self.

This is a good thing, but what contributes to a global identity crisis is not having anything stable to identify with, either within ourselves or among our friends and family. And so we do what Peter does when we begin to become aware of the coldness of the struggles we face and the confrontations we have had or need to have.

*Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself. (vs 18)*

We warm ourselves around the embers of a dying fire with people we can no longer relate to because of what we have been through. Then through a series of events, questions, or understandings, we realize in a moment, as if we heard a rooster crowing, that we have denied the very thing that defined us at the core of our being. We deny time – our past, present, and future – and we deny identity – who we have become and are becoming.

We become the “*I am Not”* that Peter expresses today. This is a sign, a signal to us, that we have lost, stepped away from, strayed, denied, Jesus’ eternal “*I AM”.* And that is the key to the whole struggle and confrontation of our lives, it seems to me: The eternal “*I AM”.*

On the eternal can anchor the ever-changing perception of the past, present, and future to which the self is subject, and it is only Jesus’ eternal “*I Am”* that can truly define who we are. In Christ, we are anchored in the eternal, not in the temporal, the finite, the unmoored. Christ anchors our sense of time and our sense of who we are in the eternal. This doesn’t mean things around us never change, nor does it mean we don’t change either – but it means the way we understand change is always in relationship to the one unchanging truth of God that never changes: the love and presence of Christ for and with us.

Blaise Pascal, the great philosopher and mathematician, said, “*Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ, we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves.”*

Think of what you know of Peter. He is impulsive. We know from Paul he can be angry. He is a man of deep feelings and we are given the impression that Peter often does things before he ever thinks about it. He says things without thinking. He works stuff out in public rather than in his head.

For each of us, there are so many things that draw us away from Jesus’ eternal *I AM.* Like a creature attracted to glittery things, we are drawn by fantastic spiritualities that would lift us out of the miasma and mud of daily existence. Like a creature hungry for passing tastes and touch, we are drawn by the constantly changing things of this world that would push us deeper into the material at the expense of the spiritual. This is Peter, and this is us.

GK Chesterton, the wonderful Catholic writer of the early 20th century, says, “*Man is not a balloon going up into the sky, nor a mole burrowing merely in the earth; but rather like a tree, whose roots are fed by the earth while its highest branches seem to rise almost to the stars.”*

And Peter is the person Jesus chooses to hold the keys of the kingdom.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear this from Jesus:

*17And Jesus answered, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you, you are Peter,**\***and on this rock**\***I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’*

The person most subject to his feelings, the person who seems to be all over the map in terms of who he is and who he thinks he is, this is the person Jesus uses as the anchor of the church. Jesus makes Peter the anchor of the church by becoming Peter’s eternal anchor himself. And so it is for each of us.

I ask you, then, where are you like Peter?

*How are you denying your past?*

*How are you denying what is happening right now?*

*How do you deny who you are becoming or what might happen in the future?*

Now that we know that Jesus anchors us, like Peter, in the eternal, Peter’s answer to the question, “*Are you not one of the disciples of the one who was arrested?”* becomes important. The answer, “*I am not”,* is the right answer in the wrong context. Once we have the presence of the eternal relative to the struggles of our history and who we think we are, “*I am not”* is the exactly right answer to many questions. With the presence of Jesus’ eternal *“I am”* as our identity*,* we can now answer *“I AM NOT my past/my struggles/my conflicts and confrontations. I AM NOT my illness/my anger/my fear. I AM NOT my difficult relationships/my broken present/my unfulfilled future.”* My identity is no longer dependent on my past or who I think I am. My identity, my past, present and future, are rooted in the eternal love of Christ.

During Lent, we are following Jesus to the Cross and then to the Resurrection. There are no shortcuts. We go through this with Peter. Struggles and confrontations are always present. In the face of them, it is easy, like Peter to forget who we are and what has led us to this moment. We must go to the Cross with Jesus before we can rise up in the Resurrection with Christ. We can hear the story of Peter and think, “*It is so horrible how much I am like Peter. Look how I have denied Jesus here, and look how I have been completely swamped by my past, and how I don’t know who I am any more”.* Or we can remember the entire story:

Peter must go through this in order to be anchored by the eternal presence of Christ. We can follow Peter through time and identity to the eternal “I AM” into the deep and unchanging love of God.

Now? We should all hope we are like Peter.

Amen.