

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY

Maundy Thursday - April 8, 2004

Anne G. Cohen

Mark 14: 17-31

32-42

53-54, 66-72

Peter's Story

I have always been a little slow - maybe a little short on imagination. I was born a fisherman and never imagined doing anything else - let alone becoming a disciple of our Messiah.

I became a disciple on impulse, but it seemed like forever before I began to understand what Jesus was talking about, the full implications of what he was doing. To be honest, all of us were a bit slow at getting the point.

But I can only judge myself - and do so freely - in the growing knowledge that comes - along with after-thoughts and regrets and those scars we call memories.

It's always difficult to talk about that night - a night that holds my deepest wound, my clearest memory - a night linked to all others - before and after - by the darkness and the fear and the doubt.

I had been up all night - almost. To my shame, I had snatched a few moments of sleep in the garden at Gethsemane - when Jesus had asked me specifically to stay awake with him and pray.

So, I had been up MOST of the night. I had witnessed the arrest of my Lord, my friend, Jesus. And I had followed that arresting crowd into town, right into the courtyard of the High Priest.

It became clear, as the evening progressed, that once Jesus was inside - they put him on trial for blasphemy. He was on trial for his life. A fair trial, it was not. But none of us knew the details until later.

We should have guessed, had we any imagination at all. I should have guessed. Instead, I waited outside for news, hoping against hope that Jesus would be released and that we could escape together - north and home to Galilee.

It was a long night - so dark, bitterly cold. The hour before dawn was the coldest yet - and I moved over to the fire to warm my hands.

I was standing among the guards and other bystanders, all strangers - when a maid of the High Priest joined us at the fire. She reported on

the wild scene inside the house.

She talked about my friend, my rabbi - as if he were an oddity, an aberration, and a danger to society.

One of the guards muttered, "Blaspheming royal pretender."

Another laughed, saying, "He thinks he's God! He's a dead man!"

My heart sank. "Then I'm a dead man," I thought.

What is it they fear in him? I wondered.

What threat does he really pose to the High Priest - to these of his household - to the people of Jerusalem? I still didn't get it.

I sighed - audibly - and the maid caught my eye. I realized later that it was the firelight flickering on my face that betrayed me. If I hadn't moved up to warm my hands, she never would have seen me. She looked at me - a strange gleam of interest in her eyes, and, after a moment, she said:

"You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus."

No question. It was a statement. How did she know? I had never seen her before. I put my trembling hands behind me and quickly responded:

"I neither know nor understand what you mean."

In a cold sweat, I turned to the darkness again, the cold again. Relief flooded my brain. I had not perjured myself with an outright lie. I merely hedged with an "I don't understand. I don't rightly remember." I headed for the shadows in the gateway, hoping still to hear news of how Jesus was faring.

At the time, I cursed Judas - blaming him for this whole situation.

"Why Jesus?" My soul cried out, "Why me? My God, where are you? Why do I stand here alone?"

As I stood there alone, the same woman passed by me and, turning to her companion, she accused me, "This man is one of them." I realized that it was no longer as dark as before; night was giving way to dawn.

I quickly said something - I don't remember the words - and the two moved away. Time - I bought just a little time.

"One of them" - them - an unnamed group, like a band of common thieves. Speaking of which, where ARE the others? I wondered. They should be here. In only a few minutes the shadows where I stood had paled.

In the gray, early morning light, someone else recognized my features:

"Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean!"

The evidence was written all over my face - my clothes. I was frantic. I cursed myself, God punish me if I lie." I spat out the words,

"I do not know this man of whom you speak!"

In the silence that followed, a cock crowed - for the second time - and I remembered. The icy fear in my heart broke, and warm tears spilled down my dusty, exhausted cheeks.

I remembered.

I remembered how, just that night, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus had told me:

"Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." (14:30)

I denied it then, swearing to die WITH him, if I must. That's easy to say, with him sitting next to me. We all said it - all of us - "We will not deny you." He said we would "all fall away." (14:27) Jesus was right. We had all perjured ourselves. Judas was one of us - and we were complicit with him in the betrayal of our Messiah. What had I done?

I remembered that only a few days earlier we had sat in that same place on the mountain, he and James, John, my brother Andrew and I. We had asked about the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. He spoke of suffering, saying:

"Take heed to yourselves; for they WILL deliver you up to councils; and you WILL be beaten in synagogues; and you WILL stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them...

WHEN they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say..." (13:9-11a)

What had I said?

Jesus said then, "From the fig tree learn its lesson." (13:28)

How many lessons had I never learned? The fig tree.

I remembered another fig tree. He cursed it on the way to Jerusalem... cursed the temple thieves as well.

We didn't see the tree again until morning. It was "withered away to its roots." (11:20) I remembered it then and, in my own brilliant, inimitable way,

I called our Rabbi's attention to the obvious:

"Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered!." (11:21)

His answer? If I can remember...

"Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him." (11:22-23)

Fig trees blasted by his curse. Mountains moved by prayer. How much prayer would it take to move this miserable Rock? (3:16)

This Rock was immobilized by fear and self-pity.

It was then - as I stood transfixed by memories - that I realized that I too had been brought to trial - in the COURTyard. I was on trial for the company I kept. I was not brought before governors and kings, but before guards and a maid. Evidence of my association was brought forth - I had been seen with Jesus, I looked like a Galilean. My crime? Being one of THEM - a follower of Jesus. If I had only said nothing...

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near... that he is near, at the very gates...

Watch...you do not know when the master of the house will come... [perhaps] at cockcrow... (13:28-35)

I had denied the Master that may someday come again at cockcrow - arriving with the light. The stories he told turn back on me - still.

Memories of that whole, long night washed over me as grief lined the dirt on my face: Judas' covert betrayal for money, the Passover supper, the covenant in bread and wine, Jesus' predictions, the praying - and sleeping -in Gethsemane, the horrible arrest, and the long, dark wait - as Jesus was tried by the chief priests and council.

What I didn't know was that Jesus - inside - remained silent in the face of conflicting testimony. Jesus said nothing - until the end - when he predicted the coming of the Son of Man. In his silence, Jesus was convicted and condemned to die.

Outside - in the courtyard - in blurting denials - I was convicted and condemned to live - with myself -

to live with all of the awful and wonderful connotations of being Peter, the Rock, disciple of Jesus Christ.

Jesus died, later that day. Jesus died. I remember.
And I weep again in the Telling.

Well-meaning friends tell me that time will lessen my grief.
They don't understand that I don't want to forget my grief.
My grief is bound up with my love and, if I stop mourning,
I will be robbed of my affections.
(Phillips Brooks, In the Midst of Winter, p.31)

No, I must continue to grieve. I must continue to love and to remember.
But my guilt - the fact of my denial and betrayal -
that icy block of fear and judgment - THAT is gone.
Each time I remember Jesus breaking the bread and passing the cup -
I remember that all things are new in the presence of Messiah.
In Christ Jesus even I am forgiven.

In my love for Him lies the power to imagine what new person I might become, what new Community might be reborn in the image of God.

Bulletin

Call to Worship

One: We are gathered together in the presence of God, Source and Giver of Life.

Many: We have come to remember the last supper which Jesus shared with the disciples.

One: We have come to wait with Jesus in the garden at Gethsemane.

Many: We have come to remember Peter's denial in the courtyard - a denial in which we are complicit.

One: Guide us, O God, as we walk with you through the darkness of this night.

Many: Be with us, not only in memory, but in reality - walking in our midst, binding us to you in faith and forgiveness, embracing us with love that will never end.

Hymn Ah, Holy Jesus (Hymnal #218)

Prayers

Prayer for Mercy

One: God, have mercy.

Many: Christ, have mercy.
One: God, have mercy.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, we have denied Your intentions for us. We have preferred our way to Christ's way. We have served ourselves and sought power and security. We have, at times, ignored Your call to love others as we love ourselves. Forgive us, cleanse us, give us back to life to serve You. Make us careful custodians of Your vision of a Just and Peaceful Society. Help us to burn with faith and to carry Your Light inside of us this night and every night. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

One: Anyone in Christ becomes a new person altogether, the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new. This is the promise of the One who has come in God's name bearing gifts of grace.
Many: In Jesus Christ we do come face to face with the power of new life.

Act of Praise

All: Glory to God the Creator, the Redeemer, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and will be ever more, world without end. Amen.

The Story of the Last Supper Mark 14:17-31

Hymn Rock of Ages (Hymnal #596 vv.1-3)

The Story of the Garden Mark 14:32-42

Solo The Fourth Word Theodore Dubois

The Story of the Peter in the Courtyard Mark 14:53-54 and 66-72

Meditation Peter's Story

Period of Silence in Preparation

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

Invitation

Words of Institution

Offering of Thanks

One: God be with you.

Many: And also with you.

One: Lift up your hearts.

Many: We lift them up to God.

One: Let us give thanks to God.

Many: It is right to give God thanks and praise.

Sharing of the Bread and Cup

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Feeding us with Your body and Your love, our faith is nourished. We draw light into our own bodies so that the darkness does not overwhelm us. You, who made each moment an opportunity to love and heal, inspire us to do the same good work. Amen.

Hymn Now the Day is Over (Hymnal #98)

Departure In Silence

**The story continues tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. at the
United Methodist Church, 2394 Erringer St., Simi Valley**