

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 14:26-31, 66-72
“Eyes on Jesus – *Denying Eyes*”
Year A – Midweek Lent 3
March 18, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Two weeks ago in our Lenten series, “Eyes on Jesus,” we looked at and through Judas’s betraying eyes and recognized our own sin as a betrayal of the Lord. Last week, we heard about the disciples’ sleepy eyes in the Garden of Gethsemane, and we identified the times we have fallen asleep as Christians. This week, we examine other ways our sinful eyes can fail us, as we watch and see the denying eyes of Peter, the other apostles, and ourselves, as well.

While they were in the Upper Room, the eleven apostles and Jesus had sung a hymn and then headed for the Mount of Olives. There were only eleven now, because Judas had already departed to get staged for his betrayal. Jesus told the group, however, that they would all fall away from him, a fulfillment of Zechariah 13:7, which says, “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”

The disciples’ proud spokesman, Simon Peter, thought he was exempt from this, though. So he said to Jesus, “Even though they all fall away, I will not” (Mark 14:29). To which Jesus replied, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times” (v. 30). But Peter said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you” (v. 31). And every single one of the apostles said the same.

“They all said the same.” It wasn’t just Peter. All of them tried to exempt themselves from what Jesus was saying and denied that they were going to fall away from Jesus. Which was foolish for many reasons, if you think about it. They were not only denying the words of the Old Testament prophet, which were being fulfilled, but even more, they were denying the words from the lips of Jesus himself! They were pushing back against what Jesus was telling them, because of their own pride, and their own sinful expectations that they were better than that, and their own unwillingness to hear what Jesus was telling them was going to happen.

But Jesus could see through all that. As the omniscient Lord, he could see through their eyes. He could see the sadness in their eyes as they thought about the awful prospect of abandoning Jesus. He could see the disbelief in their eyes as they processed what it was Jesus was saying. He could see the fervor in their eyes as they began to convince themselves by their own force of will that they would be able to keep their vows to Jesus and to God.

Jesus could see them, but the truth of the matter was that the eyes of the apostles weren’t really seeing Jesus. They weren’t keeping their eyes fixed on him, or letting the truth of his words sink into their ears; they were blinded by their own strong delusions; they were lying to themselves; they were focused on their own perceptions and plans; they had their minds set on the things of men rather than on the things of God (cf. Mark 8:33).

Ten of the apostles would go on to deny Jesus simply by falling away, in spite of their strident protests to the contrary. And then we see Peter verbally deny Jesus in dramatic fashion during a cross-examination by a servant girl and some bystanders. But as we saw last week, when Jesus was the lone person staying awake while the others slept, it had to be this way: he had to be the last one standing, the only one making “the good confession” (1 Timothy 6:13), the

only one who would never deny the will of his Father, but who would humbly submit to his suffering and death, which he did for us and for our salvation.

Jesus quoted the prophecy of Zechariah, which said, “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Mark 14:27). This is a quote from the Lord God of Israel himself. “I will strike the shepherd,” says the Father. It’s just like we heard a couple weeks ago, that the one who ultimately handed Jesus over wasn’t Judas, but the Father himself. Or as we heard last week, it was the Father’s will that Jesus drink the cup of his wrath in full.

This takes us back to Isaiah 53 and the Father’s will to crush the Messiah so that the masses would be counted as righteous in God’s sight: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him *stricken*, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was *pierced* for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4–5, emphasis added). “I will strike the shepherd,” said the Father. And Jesus was, for you and for me.

And while the Shepherd was being struck, when he was arrested and crucified, what did the sheep do? Did they remain faithful and die with their loving shepherd, like they said they would? No. Instead, they scattered and fell away. And Peter fell in such tragic fashion. Yes, he did have enough courage to at least go and get close to Jesus’ trial. But when he was pushed, he ended up invoking a curse on himself and swearing, “I do not know this man of whom you speak” (14:71).

Each week, we’ve see the various eyes with which people look upon Jesus, and this week it’s eyes of denial. And as we see this, we have to honestly ask ourselves, are we truly any better than they? Can we stand any more resolute on our own than the disciples could? Do our words, thoughts, and actions deny Jesus any less than the disciples found themselves doing? And the answer, as we should well know by now, because of our sinful nature, is no.

How many times have we stood silently while someone spoke contradicting God’s Word? How many opportunities to confess the Gospel have we passed up because we’re afraid to offend someone? How many opportunities do we have to share the Good News, especially to people who need to hear it, but we simply fail to do so?

And in these days when the world is so panicked and fretful and anxious because of the uncertainty of this coronavirus, it can be easy for us to fall in line with the world and get panicked and anxious right along with them. And that’s when our thoughts and actions betray our faith in Christ. That’s when we, even if we do not realize it, effectively deny our Shepherd. When the going gets tough, like the disciples demonstrated, the sheep go running. Probably many of us have felt our minds, or our emotions, or our hearts running all over the place the last several days.

But again, Jesus knew his disciples would do all this. He knew he would be the only one standing. He predicted it, and yet he willingly went into the hands of his enemies to be tried and tortured and crucified. He did it for all his sheep, even when they deny him. But that’s not all Jesus predicted. Remember he also said, “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (Mark 14:28).

His words about their falling away and denial did prove true, but even better, so did his prediction of the resurrection and his subsequent appearing to the apostles. And then later, to those denying and doubting apostles, Jesus forgave them, restored them, entrusted to them the teaching and baptizing that would go out to all nations, and turned deniers of God into faithful confessors, into followers of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And what about Peter, who had denied that he even knew Jesus? Well, Peter gives us an example of what we should do when we realize that, by our own power, we can't do anything but be unfaithful to Jesus. After all, how crushed do you think Peter was when the rooster crowed? Mark says, "He broke down and wept" (Mark 14:72). That's what true conviction from the Holy Spirit feels like. And Peter shows us what we are to do when we are convicted of our sin.

He wasn't like Judas, who had a change of heart, but then tried to deal with his guilt on his own. Instead, Peter had true, godly sorrow (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10) over his sin, which prepared him to hear the Absolution he would receive on Easter, when Jesus appeared to the apostles, showed them his hands and side, and spoke the forgiving, "Peace be with you."

And then later on, in Galilee, still after the Resurrection, Peter had some time with Jesus that left no doubt he was restored from being a denier and was placed into the office of faithful confessor. At the Sea of Galilee, Jesus showed up for a breakfast on the beach with some of the disciples. And the Shepherd who had been struck, but then raised from the dead, gave Peter a threefold admonition to feed His sheep (John 21:15-19). Why did Jesus say this to Peter three times? Well, Peter had denied his Shepherd three times. So, Jesus was lovingly restoring Peter for each denial that he had uttered.

Jesus lovingly restores us, as well. He turns us, who in our sin, would be nothing but deniers of him, and because of all that he did for us by his death and resurrection, we can turn our sin over to him, receive his forgiveness, and be turned by the power of the Holy Spirit into a faithful confessor, as well. Not by our power, but because of his. We can be the ones who speak Christ's love, and peace, and comfort to a world who desperately needs to hear it. We can speak it, because they can see in us people who have received it.

When Jesus finished forgiving and restoring Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he concluded by saying to Peter, "Follow me." And this is what Jesus also says to you and me. "Follow me. Fix your eyes on me. See the path I went for you. I journeyed through suffering and death and the atonement of your sin, and then I came out the other side to life." Jesus is alive. And as we heard earlier, Jesus also says, "If anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross and *follow me*."

You see, we do still deny something. But it's not Jesus. Jesus has given his all to us, so that we may have faith in him, and by his power, we can deny our sinful nature. We can deny the fear our sin may lead us into. We can deny the fact that sin and death have any power over us anymore. And instead, we can affirm that Jesus has given us peace, and forgiveness, and life.

Jesus said, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it (Mark 8:34-35). Through your Baptism into Christ, you have been given a gift greater than the whole world. You have lost your life in this world for the sake of Christ and have now found your life in him and his kingdom. And so, we journey with Jesus, following him, and looking forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. "Come, follow me," Jesus says, "for it is truly a joyful journey." In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**