

12 Then the company of soldiers, the commander, and the guards from the Jewish leaders took Jesus into custody. They bound him and led him first to Annas. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. (14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it was better for one person to die for the people.)

15 Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Because this other disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard. 16 However, Peter stood outside near the gate. Then the other disciple (the one known to the high priest) came out and spoke to the woman stationed at the gate, and she brought Peter in. 17 The servant woman stationed at the gate asked Peter, "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?"

"I'm not," he replied. 18 The servants and the guards had made a fire because it was cold. They were standing around it, warming themselves. Peter joined them there, standing by the fire and warming himself.

Jesus testifies

19 Meanwhile, the chief priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 Jesus answered, "I've spoken openly to the world. I've always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews gather. I've said nothing in private. 21 Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I told them. They know what I said."

22 After Jesus spoke, one of the guards standing there slapped Jesus in the face. "Is that how you would answer the high priest?" he asked.

23 Jesus replied, "If I speak wrongly, testify about what was wrong. But if I speak correctly, why do you strike me?" 24 Then Annas sent him, bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.

25 Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing with the guards, warming himself. They asked, "Aren't you one of his disciples?"

Peter denied it, saying, "I'm not."

26 A servant of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said to him, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" 27 Peter denied it again, and immediately a rooster crowed. **(Common English Bible)**

Two full years of global pandemic. Increased violence in our own city and throughout our nation. And now... war in Ukraine and the sense that perhaps we are on the verge of World War III. Stories of unspeakable violence unfolding among civilians, the bombing of a maternity hospital, a theater full of people seeking shelter? And the specter of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction making this a truly terrifying

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

time... for the planet. Are you, perhaps, more in touch with your vulnerability and mortality than you were a few years ago? Have you felt anxiety rising? Or slipped into depression? These are, indeed, scary days.

If you are gripped by anxiety or depression, this is not the time for action. It is the time for prayer, meditation, self care, seeking to connect with the source of love and life that never fails. So I'm glad you're here today. I hope you'll keep coming back. And perhaps consider joining us on Wednesday evenings too. I hope you'll take this season of Lent to sit with the love and mercy of God, awaiting hope, clarity, and guidance.

We resume our reflection on Jesus' last few days at another moment of heightened anxiety and threat. Clearly the time has come for Jesus. He has been arrested, brought into custody, and is beginning to stand trial. We jumped over a fair bit in the story. Jesus offers a lot of teaching at the Last Supper in John. He is trying to prepare his anxious disciples for the difficult days ahead and the years of ministry ahead, trying to pour into them all that they might need to know. And he prays for them, and indeed for us, for unity and protection. And then they head to the garden together and it is there that Judas hands him over to Roman soldiers and guards from the religious authority. Jesus willingly submits to the arrest, but asks that his followers be allowed to go free. Peter seeks to come to the defense of Jesus by drawing a sword and cutting off the ear of one of the servants of the guard. Jesus scolds him and tells him to put the sword away. It's time for him to drink the cup he's been given by the Father. It's time.

I want us to focus on Peter this week. Peter, one of the first to follow Jesus, one of the most passionate followers of Jesus— remember last week?—“ I'll never let you wash me.” Then, “wash all of me!” Wild swings provoked by honor and love, shame and anxiety. At the same meal he vowed to always follow Jesus, to give up his life for Jesus. Jesus knows that he cannot and will not fulfill this vow, not in the near future anyhow, that denial is in the cards for Peter. He tells him so.

On the one hand, it would seem that initially Peter is honoring his vow. He draws a sword in defense, a bold and brave, if misguided, action. He is only one of two disciples

who follows Jesus all the way to the courtyard of the high priest. He hangs out with guards, despite perhaps, being at risk of arrest for the violence he perpetrated in the garden. Seems like Peter is trying to be faithful, to keep following Jesus. But when people start recognizing him he denies any connection to or knowledge of Jesus, three times before the rooster crows to mark the dawning of Jesus' last day.

In other Gospels we hear that Peter wept bitterly after his denial. In John, we have silence. It is what it is. Later in the Gospel, after Jesus is resurrected, Peter is forgiven and restored to relationship with Jesus and his followers. But at that moment he seems utterly cut off, he has failed to keep his promise, to be vulnerable alongside his teacher.

It seems, on the basis of all the teaching Jesus did at the last supper, and the request he made that his disciples be allowed to scatter, that he knew that though it was his time, it was not yet time for his followers. They needed to survive to witness his resurrection and proclaim the good news to others. At the moment of his arrest, he knew they were terrified, they were like all humans, powerless in the face of death, not aware that the meaning of death was about to be transformed forevermore. He knew they were prone to anxious reactions of violence or denial or betrayal or hiding... and it seems he made space for this. He asked that they be allowed to go, to hide, to wait... When he is on trial there is a possibility they wanted him to identify his disciples so they could be rounded up and questioned to help build a case against him, but he urges them to interview anyone who ever heard him teach, to trust the public record of his ministry; he again seems to be protecting his disciples.

Peter doesn't take the protection— he draws the sword and he follows to the courtyard and he denies— 3 times. He reveals that indeed he was not ready, it was not yet his time. Later it would be, Peter does die a similar death to that of Jesus— after helping to build the church that survives to this day. Peter becomes the rock on which the church is built. But it wasn't time for that yet. Clearly.

I want us to learn from Peter what happens when we act too soon, out of our anxiety. I'm not saying that we, as followers of Jesus in a violent world, should never take action

— far from it. But I am saying that we are wise to avoid impulsive, anxious action— particularly when that action takes the form of violence or relational cut off. We are wise to ground ourselves in our values and principles, in the teachings of our faith, and wait for God to nudge us to grounded action when the time is right. I think your COVID team and Session throughout this COVID era has been a good model of this— not giving into the pressures of cultural anxiety or whims— but taking principled action again and again to promote safety and health— for example, not requiring vaccinations when so many did not have access to them, choosing to require vaccination when they became widely available and after two nasty variants led to two more shut downs of our in-person worship or maintaining mask requirements despite pressures to relax. You may not have appreciated any or all of our policies these past two years, but having been witness to the decision making processes I can attest that they have been principled decisions resisting anxiety. We have many more such decisions to make— when to go mask optional, when to resume coffee hour, circulation during the passing of the peace, rebuilding a choir or other musical ensembles, etc. It is not time for any of those decisions, yet. I trust we will continue to let science and public health officials and faith commitments guide us.

May we all find ways to breathe deeply and await guidance as time keeps slipping into the future, letting our actions be grounded in resurrection hope rather than deathly anxiety.

Source in Addition to Scripture that Influenced this Sermon

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. “Episode 333 Peter’s Denial (John 18:12-27)” on their *Bible Worm Podcast*. <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-333-peter-s-denial-john-1812-27/>