



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“Sword in the Garden”***

On This Rock a Lenten Sermon Series Part VI

*John 18 (selected verses)*

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Before we turn to our passage this morning, it’s worth noticing something about the moment we’re about to enter.

The scene of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is one of the few moments recorded in all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each one gives us a slightly different angle, like four witnesses describing the same scene.

Matthew and Mark draw us deeply into the anguish of Jesus—the weight of sorrow, the wrestling of his soul. Luke adds a striking detail: that his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground, emphasizing the intensity of his suffering.

But John does something different. He doesn’t linger on the inner agony. Instead, he moves us quickly to the moment of confrontation. He simply tells us that Jesus went to a garden across the Kidron Valley, and he’s the only Gospel writer to name Peter as the disciple with the sword.

And one more thing to note: John doesn’t include the detail of the disciples falling asleep. But all other three Gospels do, and that detail helps round out our understanding of the moment. So, as we walk through John’s account in the sermon, I’ll occasionally draw on those other Gospel perspectives as well.

John 18 (selected verses). <sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup> Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place because Jesus often met there with his disciples. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” <sup>5</sup> They answered, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they stepped back and fell to the ground. <sup>7</sup> Again he asked them, “Whom are you looking for?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these people go.” <sup>9</sup> This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me.” <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

<sup>12</sup> So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him.

<sup>15</sup> 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, <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> The woman said to Peter, ‘You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?’ He said, ‘I am not.’

<sup>25</sup> 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.’ <sup>26</sup> 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?’ <sup>27</sup> Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

Last Monday, I shared the stories of Holy Week at Hallelujah Mountain, our preschool chapel. Class by class, the children and I made little processions from the chapel into the sanctuary, waving paper palm branches and calling out, “Hosanna!”

Every year, we act out this part of the story, and I try to explain what it means. “Hosanna” sounds like a cheer of praise. As a child, I thought it meant, “Hooray for God!” or “Go, king!” But it doesn’t. In Hebrew, it means something closer to a cry for help: “Save now!” “Help us now!”

At first glance, it might seem a little strange that on Palm Sunday we didn’t read the story of palm branches and processions, of children singing “Hosanna!” and crowds cheering as Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph.

But given where we are in this sermon series on the Apostle Peter, and given the state of the world around us, it may be exactly where we need to be.

Because the road from “Hosanna” on a Sunday morning leads directly here:

- to the garden,
- to the arrest,
- to this moment Peter will never forget.



So today, we're not in the streets of Jerusalem. We are in the garden. Not with palm branches, but with swords and torches.

Peter has been at the center of this Gospel story all along. At the Last Supper, Peter boldly declares, "*Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you,*" (John 13:37). And we get the sense Peter means it. This is the same Peter who, when Jesus kneels to wash his feet, resists him at first. "*You will never wash my feet,*" Peter declares in John 13. And when Jesus responds, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," Peter responds in the opposite extreme. Then, "*Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!*" (John 13:9).

That's Peter. He's all in all the time. He doesn't want to do anything halfway.

But then we move from the table to the garden. Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus had eight of the disciples wait and pray at the gate of the garden. He took Peter, James, and John in further to pray. Jesus asks them to stay awake, to watch and to pray. But they fall asleep. Not once, not twice, but three times. "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." This might be one of the most compassionate things Jesus says about us. Peter loves Jesus, he knows this. Peter does want to be faithful, but he's tired. He's overwhelmed. He's human.

I imagine we all know something of that kind of tired. There were nights I fell asleep nursing a baby, knowing that sleep could mean she might roll right out of my arms. There are nights when I'm up working late – writing this sermon, working on a paper, trying to finish something important, and I find myself nodding off at the dining room table, typing things that make no sense, trying to stay focused, but I just ... can't.

Peter is in that kind of moment. He wants so badly to stay awake. But he just ... can't.

And everything changes.

Torches appear in the distance. They must have heard the footsteps approaching. It is Judas Iscariot, leading the soldiers and police. Suddenly, the moment Peter has been talking about, the moment he promised he was ready for, is here. And this time, Peter doesn't fall asleep. He acts. John tells us, "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." (John 18:10) Peter is the only one ready and willing to do something. In fact, he does exactly what he said he would do when he declared, "*I will lay down my life for you.*"

Peter's reflex in this moment is courage. It's loyalty and it's love. But it's also completely wrong. We want a God who will take up the sword when things fall apart. A God who will fix things quickly, decisively, unmistakably. But the God we meet in Holy Week is not a God who refuses suffering, but a God who enters it. Not a God who stays distant from our pain, but one who inhabits it fully. Which means that in this moment, when Jesus tells Peter to put the sword away, he is not surrendering to defeat. He is choosing a different kind of power altogether, the power of a love that will go all the way to the cross.<sup>1</sup>



Jesus stops him immediately. “Put your sword back into its sheath.” (John 18:11a) In another Gospel, Matthew (26:52), Jesus says, “Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will die by the sword.” And then Jesus (in Luke’s version of the scene, Luke 22:51), in the middle of his own arrest, heals the man who’s come to arrest him.

It’s a scene that perhaps many Christian nationalists would prefer to ignore – but this, friends, is one of the clearest pictures we have of the kind of king Jesus is. On Palm Sunday, the crowds welcomed him like a king, but this is what his kingship in God’s kingdom actually looks like. Not violence, but healing. Not domination, but surrender. Not saving himself, but giving himself.

Everything seems to unravel. Jesus is arrested. The disciples scatter. And Peter, who just swung a sword, now follows at a distance. Peter makes his way into the courtyard of the high priest. He stands by a fire, trying to stay warm and unnoticed. And it’s there, in the flickering light, he is asked a simple question. “*You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?*” (John 18:17)

The Gospel gives us two scenes unfolding at the same time. Inside, Jesus is being questioned by the high priest. Outside, Peter is being questioned by bystanders. Inside, Jesus speaks openly, telling his would-be-jury, “I have said nothing in secret.” Outside, Peter denies even knowing him. Inside: truth. Outside: fear. Inside: courage. Outside: self-preservation. And we are meant to see them together, a study in contrast.

Methodist minister and author Adam Hamilton raises the question in his study on the Apostle Peter, why do we even know this story? He wonders, why would Peter, the leader of the early church, the one Jesus calls the rock, allow this story to be told? And why would all four Gospels include it? Hamilton’s answer to his own question is that we know this story because Peter must have told it.<sup>ii</sup> Because if he didn’t tell it, we might believe discipleship is about getting everything right. We might think faith means never failing. But Peter tells the truth. And in so doing, he shows us what it really looks like to follow Jesus. And it looks... a lot like us.

It looks a lot like ordinary people who know what it’s like to be tired when we are called to be faithful. It looks like people who know how to behave like a Christians but still make the wrong choices. We know what it’s like to choose comfort over courage. We know what it’s like to stay by the fire and warm ourselves, rather than stand with Christ. We know what it’s like to remain quiet when our witness is needed.

It’s why we have a prayer of confession every single Sunday. Because we need it, every single time.

The good news is that Peter’s story doesn’t end in the garden or that courtyard. Because a few days later, just after Easter, Peter will sit by another fire – this time with the risen Jesus – and have a chance to repent.

The one who failed will be the one to lead. The one who denied will be the one to proclaim.



On this Palm Sunday, as we remember the crowds shouting, “Hosanna!” “Save us!” we also remember the garden. We remember the sword. We remember the fire. We remember the denial. This messy, disappointing piece of the story is a part of our story, too.

It is by God’s incredible grace that God does not define us by the worst thing we have done.

So, I wonder, where have you fallen asleep when you were meant to stay awake? Where have you reached for the wrong kind of sword? Where have you stood by the fire instead of taking a stand?

This Holy Week, we are invited to bring all of that to Christ. Because, in the end, this is our hope: not that we will always be faithful, but that God will. We are held by a crucified God, a God who enters our fear, our failure, our denial, and even our death, and refuses to let those things have the final word.

The same Jesus who stood in the garden, who healed his enemy, who forgave his disciples, still meets us here. Still calls us and restores us.

And he’s still building his church. Not on perfect people, but on people like Peter. People like us.

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<sup>i</sup> Debie Thomas, “A Crucified God” [JourneywithJesus.net](http://JourneywithJesus.net), 29 March 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple*, (Abingdon Press: 2018), 103-104.

