

The Passion of Lent: Peter's Denials

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Prayer of Illumination

Jesus, we believe, help our unbelief.
Amen.

Background

Did you know that there's a rich spirituality of roosters in our faith—from the earliest of times? The word *gever* in Hebrew means both "man" and "rooster." In ancient Judaism, there was not only the scapegoat, but what could almost be called the "scape rooster" or "scape hen." After quoting Scripture, a man would offer a rooster or a woman a hen as a sacrifice, saying the words,

This is my exchange, my substitute, my atonement; this rooster (or hen) shall go to its death, but I shall go to a good, long life, and to peace.

The rooster also helped people tell time in the ancient world. There was the first cock crowing which was just after midnight and the second cock crowing at the first dawn.

Roosters became symbolic to Christians and drawings of them can be found in ancient Christian tombs. This 3rd century fresco from a catacomb in Rome depicts Christ as the Good Shepherd. If you look closely, you'll see a rooster by his right foot. Many churches in Europe—both Catholic and Protestant—have a rooster atop their steeples.

The golden rooster weathervane is said to be a symbol of Jesus Christ who breaks the power of the darkness, forgives our sins, and announces a new day by the power of His resurrection.

The Rooster is also symbolic of our human conscience—brought out of its slumber by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

The rooster calls us back to the truth: Peter failed, we all have failed—but *Christ has the victory!*

And so the divine cock-a-doodle-do is a spiritual wake-up call and reality check:

We need God's grace—desperately.
Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

Christ knows us better than we know ourselves—He knows that we're all too human and he *still* welcomes us back, even if we've doubted or denied him.

So let's hear now from:

Scripture: Mark 14: 26-31; 66-72 (NRSV)

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written,

'I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.'

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about."

And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Peter's Denials

We just read that Jesus and the disciples sang together in the Upper Room after the Last Supper. They likely sang one of the Hallel Psalms, Psalms 113-118. This is the only time the gospels mention Jesus singing. It makes you wonder what kind of voice Jesus had. *Was he a tenor, baritone, or bass?*

They continued conversing along the way to the Mount of Olives, and Jesus told the disciples that the scriptures foretold that you will all be deserters:

"Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered."

"Jesus," said Peter, "Even though ALL become deserters, I will not." "Truly I say to you, before the cock crows twice Peter, you will deny me three times."

Peter doubled-down, saying vehemently, *"Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you."*

Peter wasn't alone in saying this. The rest of the disciples adamantly agreed with Peter and said the same. *"Jesus—we've got this aced. We have your back."*

But every single one of them, every single one of us—Fail, flail, falter, fumble, flee, and fall flat on our face. It's a sober reminder for us Immanuel: Beware of getting too cocksure about ourselves and our bold declarations. Stay humble. Pride cometh before the fall. Don't put more faith in yourself than in Christ.

In the next scene, we fast forward past the Garden of Gethsemane—we'll circle back to that next week. Outside the temple there's a foreshadowing about how Peter will fare when the story says that Peter *"was down below in the courtyard."* While Jesus was beaten and tortured, Peter was at a distance, comforting himself by the fire. While Jesus was questioned by the High Priest, Peter was grilled by the servant girl of the High Priest. While Jesus stayed silent during his examinations, Peter was quite vocal on the witness stand—defending himself. First pleading ignorance: *"I don't know or understand what you're talking about."*

Now there's some irony here because Peter is in some ways being honest about all those times he didn't understand what Jesus was saying or doing. But then he turned things up a notch. In the second round of queries, he flat-out denies Christ. *I'm not associated with him.* And then, for a third time curses and swears before all the bystanders that were now questioning him—*I don't know the man!*

It's so dang easy to get full of ourselves—overconfident. We're one of a kind, special, unique—a stand out. We think we're the exception. Studies have been done and 90% of people think they're better than average drivers. On social media we put on display our "flawless lives." Yes, we're unique and beloved children of God. But we all sin, stumble, and fall short. This is where our Reformed faith helps us: Faith is a gift from God, not of our own doing. We have no reason to boast or claim credit. Christ's redemption happens not only *apart from*, but *in spite of* our best knowledge and efforts.

John Calvin put it this way, that Peter's denial

*teaches those who stand to take care and caution,
and it encourages the fallen to trust in pardon.*

When you've royally flubbed up, and the cock crows in your life—LISTEN! Weep bitterly.

Ecclesiastes 7:3 says, "a sad face is good for the heart."

Paul says "godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret. Peter the Rock hit rock bottom. Sometimes you need a breakdown before a breakthrough. But Peter didn't stay there. He got up. The gospels use Peter as an example or representative for all disciples.

Because Peter got us, we've got to get up. Reunite with the one you deserted. Break bread with the one you betrayed. Embrace again the one you denied. Hear the good news cock-a-doodle-dooed by the Rooster:

You're free to lay down the insurmountable burden of being perfect. Stop pretending. Jesus already knows you aren't perfect. Rest in the everlasting arms that forgive and accept you.

Have the courage of Peter:

Learn from the past AND move forward.

All FOUR gospels have Peter's three denials and the cock crowing. In other words, this is an important message for us. Peter had the guts to admit his shortcomings. AND YET—that low point didn't define him. He moved on.

Jesus tells Peter in our passage, and tells us:

"After I'm raised up—I WILL GO BEFORE YOU."

Know that Christ is still walking ahead of you, going before you—waiting to receive you again. He succeeded where we failed. Jesus knows both the difficulty of discipleship and the grace of discipleship. He knows we'll get tripped up, yet he still calls us to follow the one who is always ahead of us.

We know later Peter was restored. After the resurrection, Jesus gave Peter three new opportunities to proclaim his love for him after his three denials. Peter failed, but Jesus' prophecy proved correct. Jesus knows what's going on.

So let's continue following Christ along our Lenten journey. Next week, we're circling back to the Garden of Gethsemane.

Amen.

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