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Psalm 86:11-17

Mark 14:27-31; 66-72

## VIA DOLOROSA: DENYING CHRIST

The sound of a cock crowing would not be out of the ordinary in first century Jerusalem. People wouldn't think twice about it. It was background noise, so familiar that it would hardly have been noticed. There are various noises to which you and I can get accustomed. My family lives a quarter mile from a SEPTA train station. We've gotten where we can sleep through the train whistles that are late at night or early in the morning because we have gotten used to them.

In the account from the Gospel of Mark, the first time the cock crowed, Peter did not think twice about it. There were other things on his mind. He was in the courtyard outside the residence of the high priest when that first shrill call sounded. Just a brief time earlier, Judas had betrayed the one he had followed, by leading the temple guard to Gethsemane to find Jesus and arrest him. As this happened, we are told the other disciples deserted Jesus and fled. Even though Mark indicates that Jesus had foreseen what was coming, these events had caught his followers by surprise. They did not want to get caught by anything or anybody else. So they ran away, disappearing into the dark. Jesus had told them earlier that evening that they would all desert him. In response, Peter had confidently crowed that he would never desert him. But Jesus then told him he would deny him three times that very night before the cock crowed twice. Vehemently, Peter claimed that even if he faced death, he would not deny him.

After Jesus' arrest took place, Peter could have claimed that he did not desert his Lord. As the prisoner was taken to the high priest's house for the temple authorities to put him on trial, we are told Peter followed at a distance. But even as Jesus was being unjustly interrogated inside, Peter was surprised to face his own milder interrogation outside in the courtyard. Later followers of Jesus, those

who were the initial readers of Mark's Gospel when it was written about forty years after the events described, were also facing interrogators with the possibility of persecution for themselves. They would see the difference between what Jesus modeled and what Peter had done. The latter's goal had been to stay just close enough to see what was going to happen to Jesus without much risk. He was curious, very concerned, but his willingness to have to do something courageous on behalf of Jesus was not there. He wanted to believe his faith was stronger than it was. As he was trying to stay warm, Peter got close enough to the courtyard fire that his face caught some of its light. A servant-girl noticed him and said, "You were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." In response, Peter lied, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." He was not facing anywhere near as powerful a person as was Jesus, and yet in the midst of the dizzying events, Peter felt the need to deny this most important relationship. As he was retreating into a darker part of the courtyard, willing for safety's sake to move further away from his Lord, it was then that the cock crowed for the first time. But at this point, Peter wasn't focused on what Jesus had predicted that he would do.

The suspicious woman followed him out into the forecourt, telling those around them, "This man is one of them." This time Peter denies association with other followers of Jesus. After this second denial, the cock made no more noise than did Peter's conscience. He was choosing expedience over truth, the safe course over one of devotion. It was a little while later that some of the bystanders must have heard Peter talking and recognized his northern accent. "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." In response this time, Peter lets loose with expletives, saying in the cleaned-up version, "I do not know this man you are talking about." He then swears an oath, something like, "May God punish me if I am not telling the truth." Just then, the cock crowed a second time, and Peter realized to his great dismay, that Jesus' prediction had indeed come true.

There is more than one way we can respond to such a story. We are sitting in a church that acknowledges Jesus Christ – we aren't doing what Peter did. And yet, this is a safe place. There are places even in today's world where being open

about one's Christian faith could put one in danger. I visited El Salvador in 1987, at a time when parts of the church there were speaking out against the repressive tactics of the government and the paramilitary that was trying to silence such critics. Our group visited with members of a congregation that had seen close to one-third of its members arrested, kidnapped, or killed because of their outspoken ways. We realized that through their meeting with us and through their continuing peaceful demonstrations against death squads, they were in grave danger because of their faithful witness to Jesus Christ. As they humbly shared of their story, I found myself in awe of their faithful lives.

We generally have not faced such a high cost for being followers of Jesus Christ. Our lives are not on the line. And yet, some of the choices we make may show more dedication to convenience than to Christ. At a time in our society, when people of faith are often portrayed in a negative light, and sometimes deservedly so, are we willing to let people know at work or in our neighborhood that we are Christians? Do we speak out for those who are being treated unjustly, or do we stay silent when hateful talk and actions take place around us or in the public arena? Does our level of generosity, our desire to forgive someone who has wronged us, our willingness to show love to someone who is hated, show us to be someone who follows Jesus at a distance or someone who readily accepts the cost of discipleship?

Don't you wonder why Jesus made reference to the cock crowing as part of his prediction of Peter's unfaithfulness? On that same trip to Central America I mentioned earlier, our group also went to Nicaragua. In one of the villages there, our accommodations consisted of a little rooming facility where we each had a bedroom about twice the size of the single bed that was in it. The restroom facilities could be described as 'down the path.' In the rooms, there was no electricity, so we relied on candlelight for the limited time we stayed in our rooms. The walls of the room had angled slats to let light in during the day and to allow for some welcome circulation of air during this summer night. Of course, the openings in the walls also allowed the sounds from outside drift into our rooms. But it was a quiet village, so I had peaceful rest until about four in the

morning. It was then that a rooster who sounded like he was so close that he was in my room, took it upon himself to announce that daylight was on the way. The dawn of the new day was not yet apparent. It was still pitch dark in my little room. But the crowing of the rooster, as unwelcome as it was at that hour, told me that daylight was going to come.

When Peter realized what he had done, when he broke down and wept, he did not know it at the time, but he was, even in his unfaithfulness, by God's grace, moving toward daylight. We remember the later stories about Peter, after the resurrection, after he was filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, how he openly declared his faith in Jesus Christ. The symbol of the Holy Spirit is typically a dove. But I think God's Spirit was at work in the form of a rooster that night. As painful as that was for Peter, that moved him toward the day of Pentecost.

I occasionally get a question about our worship practice of including a prayer of confession of sin every Sunday. Some might think its wording is a bit too negative about ourselves. Yet, with Peter's experience being part of your story and mine, a prayer of confession can be a softly-crowing rooster, if we pay attention to it. God does not desire that we walk around with the weight of harsh judgment and guilt on our shoulders. Instead, as we become aware of and admit our shortcomings before God and neighbor, we are not just more aware of our guilt, we are, by God's grace, moving toward daylight. Whether it is a rooster crowing, a prayer of confession, the season of Lent - whatever speaks to us to help us know that daylight is on the way, let us listen to that. Listen, and then, empowered by God, let us with our words and actions affirm that God's gift of daylight is what is intended for all. Thanks be to God. Amen.