

**Midweek Lenten Service**  
**March 21, 2012**  
**Mark 14:53-72**

*“A Savior Who Serves: Denial”*

In our Lenten journey, tonight we travel from the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was betrayed into the city of Jerusalem, to the courtyard of the high priest’s palace where Jesus was interrogated in an unofficial and illegal preliminary trial by the Sanhedrin, the Ruling Council of Jerusalem. There is a split-screen before us with what is going on inside the palace of the high priest with Jesus’ interrogation and what is going on outside in the courtyard with Peter’s denial of Jesus. Both are significant, but our primary focus is upon what happens outside. Our Lenten focus continues this evening under the theme: “A Savior Who Serves: Denial.” I am indebted to Dr. Paul Maier and his marvelous book, *First Easter: The True and Unfamiliar Story* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1973), which provides many historical insights into our Lord’s Passion. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

The first side of our split screen takes us inside the palace of the high priest with Jesus’ interrogation. Mark’s account does not name who the high priest is, but John’s Gospel does (John 18:12-14). Although Caiaphas is noted as being high priest that year, his father-in-law was Annas, who had been deposed by the Romans from office. And yet Annas exerted tremendous influence as the power-behind-the-throne since five of his sons served as high priest, as well as his son-in-law. In deference to his position, Jesus was first brought to Annas, and then to Caiaphas. And all of this takes place in the dead of night. According to Jewish law (the Talmud), no proceedings involving a man’s life could take place at night, but must happen in full daylight. But to wait until the next day would run the risk of word getting out to the masses that Jesus had been arrested, which would trigger a riot during the Passover festival. This would most assuredly bring down the iron fist of Rome, and heads would roll. Better to have an illegal pre-trial by night, and then at the break of day bring the accused before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, before anyone really knew what had happened. With the testimony of witnesses not agreeing as they speak against Jesus, things are falling apart quickly. The high priest cuts to the chase and asks Jesus point blank: **“Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”** (Mark 14:61). Jesus affirms the truth: **“I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven”** (Mark 14:62). Blasphemy! It’s all over and Jesus is condemned to death. And before death, jeering and abuse at the hands of the temple guards.

The second side of our split screen takes us outside the palace of the high priest into the courtyard. It’s still early spring and nights are very chilly. There’s a fire burning the courtyard and people are gathered around it to stay warm, including Peter. Of the disciples who fled when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, only two – Peter and John – cautiously follow Jesus at a distance (John 18:15). There in the shadows of that fire in the courtyard, Peter is confronted by people who recognize him: one of the servant girls and another bystander. John tells us that this bystander was a relative of Malchus, whose ear Peter had cut off with his sword when Jesus was arrested (John 18:26). They all say the same thing and challenge Peter three times: “You’re one of them. I saw you with Jesus.” They link Peter to Jesus because of his Galilean accent. Each time he is challenged, Peter openly and publicly denies knowing who Jesus is

or anything about him: **“I do not know this man of whom you speak”** (Mark 14:71). He even calls down a curse on himself and swears that he does not Jesus. Is this not also blasphemy? It is at that very moment, while Peter’s very words still hang in the air, that the rooster crows a second time, fulfilling Jesus’ prophecy: **“Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times”** (Mark 14:72). Luke’s account records how the Lord turned at this instant and from inside the palace looked at Peter (Luke 22:61), making eye contact with him, silently calling to his remembrance what had been said. Peter breaks down in bitter tears of anguish and remorse.

What is it like to be denied, disowned, dismissed? What must have been going through Jesus’ mind when Peter openly and publicly denied him? What must go through Jesus’ mind when we openly and publicly, or secretly and privately, deny knowing Jesus? This isn’t just a “Peter” thing; this is an “us” thing. Jesus tells us: **“... whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven”** (Matthew 10:33). Through our words and actions, we also deny the Lord Jesus, and that is a very serious matter. Like Peter, we cave in under pressure. Desiring to fit in and not stand out from others, we are all too prone to deny ever having known the Savior. It’s like that Lenten hymn puts it:

*Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.  
’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;  
I crucified thee. (Lutheran Book of Worship #123, stanza 2)*

Like Peter, we may also weep bitter tears of anguish and remorse for denying the very One who gave his life for us. It is for this very thing that Jesus suffered and died: to pay the price for our sin, a price we could not and cannot pay. Stanza two of the hymn we are about to sing, “Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” says it this way:

*Upon the cross of Jesus, my eye at times can see  
The very dying form of one who suffered there for me.  
And from my contrite heart, with tears, two wonders I confess:  
The wonder of his glorious love and my unworthiness (Lutheran Book of Worship #107).*

Thanks be to God for the Savior who serves! Amen.