

COCKCROW

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from the pulpit of
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Matthew 26:31-35; 69-75

³¹Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ ³²But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” ³³Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” ³⁴Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” ³⁵Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” ⁷⁰But he denied it before all of them, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.” ⁷¹When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him,

and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷² Again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.”⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.”⁷⁴ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know the man!” At that moment the cock crowed.⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

130 decibels or more – that is the acoustic intensity if you are near a crowing rooster, which is roughly the same volume you’d get from standing 50 feet from a jet as it takes off.¹ During this sermon series of all creatures great and small, we have focused on a variety of animals in the scriptural account that have had widely varying qualities. Today we focus on a story that includes a fairly small, but quite loud animal.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we enter at a very intense part of the story on the night before Jesus would be crucified. Soon after Jesus had his last supper with his disciples, he tells them that they would all desert him when things got tough. In response, proud as a rooster, Peter crows, “Even if all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” Underestimating the power that fear would have over him, the disciple lies to himself about the strength of his commitment. With sadness, Jesus then makes another prediction, “This very night, before the cock crows, you (Peter) will deny me three times.”

We then move further into the story after Jesus has been arrested and taken to the house of the high priest for what would be an overnight, unjust interrogation. Peter comes into the courtyard outside that residence, quietly trying to find out what is going on. His goal had been to stay just close enough to see what was happening to Jesus without incurring much risk. He was very concerned, but his capacity to say or do something courageous on behalf of Jesus was absent at that point. Even in the dark, a servant in the courtyard notices Peter and says, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” Peter quickly denies it. That’s one. He then wanders out to the porch, where another servant sees him and says to those with her, “This man was with Jesus the Nazarene.” Again, Peter denies it, this time with an oath. That’s two. He had now drawn unwanted attention - others who were there say to

¹ www.science.org/content/article/how-roosters-protect-themselves-their-own-deafening-crows

him, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your (Galilean) accent betrays you.” Peter curses and swears an oath, telling them, “I do not know the man!” That’s three. At that moment, the cock crowed.

Jesus, why did you pair Peter’s denials with a prediction about the crowing of a rooster? Did Peter’s Lord, our Lord, want 130 decibels of a shaming message? That would not reflect the steadfast love of God that is a frequent scriptural theme. And Jesus knew that shame is not a good pathway toward greater faithfulness. The lies Peter had told himself had a serious detrimental grip on him. And now, in fear, he was telling lies to others. Perhaps, the loud cockcrow was needed to awaken him to that reality.

Years ago, I traveled with a group of Presbyterians to Nicaragua to see how people of faith there were doing in a period of time after a damaging earthquake and during a time of civil war in their country. In one of the villages to which our group traveled, our accommodations consisted of a set of little rooming facilities where we each had a structure just bigger than the single bed that was in it. The restroom facilities could be described as ‘down the path.’ In each structure, there was no electricity, so I relied on candlelight for the limited time I was inside and awake. 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 the summer night. Of course, the openings in the walls also allowed the sounds from outside to 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 loudly do what roosters do even before daylight. I did not sleep through that!

It could not have been a welcome sound when the rooster crowed right after Peter denied knowing Jesus. But paired with Jesus’ prediction, the

loud crowing startled Peter into a realization of the dreadful thing he had done. The first part of the work of God's grace is not to shame any of us for our lack of faithfulness, but to awaken in us a recognition of our brokenness and our need of God's grace. Upon hearing the rooster crowing, Peter suddenly realized that he had not lived up to the faithfulness to which he aspired. However, after the cock's crow, he did not immediately tell those who had questioned him that he did in fact know Jesus and was one of his closest followers. He did not march into the high priest's house and demand Jesus' release. But there was a loud crowing that had pierced Peter's conscience, that awakened him to his own brokenness, and moved him in his dark night of unfaithfulness to repentant weeping. Yet, God's grace had more to do.

Back to the rooster in Nicaragua - the dawn of the new day was not yet apparent when the rooster woke me up. It was still pitch dark in my little room. But the crowing of that rooster, as unwelcome as it was at that hour, told me that daylight was on its way. The word, 'cockcrow' actually means the dawn of a new day.² Peter had been awakened to his brokenness. He wept with repentance. But he needed something more. He needed forgiveness that would move him beyond his dark night of the soul. A bit later in Matthew's account, as Jesus was dying on the cross, we are told that darkness came over the land from noon until three o'clock – at which point the light of a new day of forgiveness was coming. That would be the second part of the work of God's grace – one that offered Peter forgiveness for what he had done and what he had failed to do.

A third expression of God's grace would be the transformation that would take place in Peter. We are reminded of the later stories about him, after Jesus' resurrection, after his followers were filled with the

² www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cockcrow

Holy Spirit on Pentecost morning, how putting aside his fears, Peter openly and courageously declared his faith in Jesus Christ before large crowds after the dawn of that new day. It is amazing to believe this could be the same person who denied Jesus three times, but it was.

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 on that most difficult of nights. Peter needed a loud wake-up call to recognize how he had been lying to himself about the level of his faithfulness. He wanted to follow Jesus, but only at a safe distance, which led to him lying to others. He didn't need to be shamed into a deeper faith. He needed awareness leading to repentance, forgiveness, and transformation. 1, 2, 3 expressions of God's grace were provided to move Peter toward the new day of Pentecost and beyond as one of the strongest leaders of the early church.

There is more than one way we can respond to such a story. We gather for worship in a place based on the ministry of Jesus Christ – we aren't denying him in doing so. Yet, this is a sanctuary, a safe place. Unlike some Christians in certain parts of the world where persecution takes place, we generally have not faced a very high cost for being followers of Jesus Christ. At times, we might lie to ourselves thinking we are more faithful than other followers. And yet, some of the choices we make may show more dedication to caution and 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? As a matter of faith, do we rise to the defense of people who are being treated unjustly? Do we stay silent when hateful talk and actions take place around us or in the public arena? Do we follow Jesus at a safe distance, or do we faithfully live out a bold love to which we are called?

Different things can awaken us to our need for God's grace to be at work within us. Among them, I would say a prayer of confession can be a much softer cockcrow for us. God does not desire that we walk around with the shaming weight of harsh judgment and guilt on our shoulders. Instead, as we admit to our shortcomings before God and neighbor, we are not simply more aware of our lies and our guilt. We are, by God's grace, moving toward what cockcrow means – the dawn of a new day. God's grace springs from the unearned, unmerited, unconditional love of God. As we are rooted in that love and grace, by God's transformational power, our words and actions can move toward being closer to courageous than cowardly, even as we affirm the rooster's 130 decibel much-needed message: that a new day intended for all is coming. Thanks be to God.

Amen.