

Sermon #1,134: Mark 14:27-31 (#297, *Passion Hymn*, #334/335, *Christ Be My Leader*)
3-18-15 (Lent 4 Midweek Vespers), Bethany-Princeton MN
Also preached 3-25-15 at Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Santiago Twp., MN

"I TELL YOU THE TRUTH: YOU WILL DENY ME"

The Text, St. Mark 14:27-31 (GWN). ²⁷ Then Jesus told them, "You will all stumble in your faith, because it is written: *'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'* ²⁸ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." ²⁹ Peter answered Him, "Even if they all stumble in their faith, I will not." ³⁰ "I tell you the truth," Jesus told him, "today, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." ³¹ But he kept insisting even more strongly, "If I have to die with You, I will never deny You." **All the others said the same thing.**

Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. O faithful Savior, as a loving Shepherd You tenderly watch over Your sheep: We humbly ask You, keep Your eyes upon us when we are in danger of growing secure and careless. All we like sheep have gone astray; but turn us again to You and impart Your grace to us, that, being dead to sins, we may live unto righteousness, and evermore serve You, who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy, companion book for The Lutheran Hymnal, p. 108, prayer based on Luke 22:31-34/1 Peter 2:25*)

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes teaching Bible history or catechism class, when it's an issue that might be awkward, like addressing a specific sin, I make a blanket statement that applies in a general way, not singling out anyone. Invariably someone will raise a hand and say, "Well, I have done such and such ..." or "But my parents do such and such ..." There I was being careful, trying not to embarrass anyone, and they do it to themselves. But there is something endearing about what they do. It's childlike innocence. They're just being honest. Telling the truth.

This is sort of what Peter does here. Because there ends up being so much focus on Peter's denial, we tend to forget that this begins with Jesus saying something to all 11 disciples who were still in the upper room after Judas went out.

“Jesus told them, ‘You will all stumble in your faith, because it is written: *I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.*’ ” At this point it’s about all of them. But then Peter foolishly puts himself forward, up on a pedestal while looking down on the others, as he says: “**Even if they all stumble in their faith, I will not.**” *Oh Peter*, Jesus must have thought. He had given a general warning about all of them, but now Peter did this to himself.

This prompted yet another “I-tell-you-the-truth” statement from Jesus: “**I tell you the truth, today, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times.**” This doesn’t seem like something Jesus should introduce with “**I tell you the truth ...**” It doesn’t seem like a truth to teach; it’s just telling what Peter would do, on that night. But it’s more than that. It really takes us back to that truth-telling thing. This is not only a reflection on Jesus. It is also a reflection on Peter and the apostles, and it teaches us about God’s Word.

We are used to the modern-day attacks on the truth of God’s Word. You hear people say the apostles just made it up. But if they did that, they would try to make themselves look better than this! But they don’t hide it, so this is one thing that testifies to the truthfulness of the written Word of God, the Bible.

Peter, in fact, is the human source of Mark’s Gospel. No less an authority than the apostle John said many years later that Mark’s Gospel was Mark writing down what Peter remembered. Mark’s Gospel is God speaking, but it’s also Peter speaking. So what we are hearing about Peter’s denial is something that Peter is not hiding. This is out in the open. And it testifies to the truth of God’s Word.

First we hear Jesus say: “**All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: *I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.***” Later in this chapter we see it come true: “*They all forsook Him, and fled*” (Mk 14:50). Then we hear Peter declare: “**If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!**” The next words Mark records are: “**And they all said likewise.**”

We hear Jesus' prediction to Peter: **"I tell you the truth, today, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times."**

So is this true? We find out, with exactness and specifics. At the end of this long chapter 14 of Mark, we hear Peter's response to a servant girl saying that he was with Jesus, and although it is not a soldier but a mere servant girl he is facing, bold and brave Peter turns into a sniveling coward as he says: *"I neither know nor understand what you are saying."* Then we hear that a rooster crows, the first time. Then we hear two more denials, his final denial the most emphatic: *"He began to curse and swear, 'I do not know this Man of whom you speak!' "*, which is like saying, *"Let me be condemned if I would say I know Him."* At this point Peter had denied Jesus three times and the rooster had crowed only once. Right after the third denial, the rooster crowed a second time just as Jesus had said.

Now, while we are seeing how bad Peter looks, we also have to realize he is the only disciple left to be taken down. All the others had fled, just as Jesus had foretold. Before Peter denied Jesus with his mouth, the others denied Him with their feet, running away and forsaking Jesus to save their own skins.

Shortly after we read, *"they all forsook Him and fled,"* Mark also writes, *"Peter followed Him at a distance."* Then come all the painful details of his denial. It is just painful to read, especially in Mark where you go through it so slowly with all this detail. The point is that it happened just as Jesus had said.

Nothing is hidden from us of the sinful weakness of Peter and the other apostles. This is why Jesus' words **"I tell you the truth"** make it a truth bigger than just the history of this event. Their sinful weakness is your sinful weakness. Their foolish arrogance is your foolish arrogance. Their self-reliance is your self-reliance. How they are taken down in temptations is how you are taken down. How their sins condemn them is how your sins condemn you. But this is why the apostles do not hide what is so reprehensible and disappointing in their behavior

– it is so that when you come to God’s Word you are not reading an idealized description of angelic beings who are above you or unlike you. You see sinners.

This is yet another thing that testifies to the truth of God’s Word.

But that is not all. This truth would be oppressive if all it revealed is what your conscience reveals to you: that you are a sinner. But there is a greater truth: that you have a Savior. This is the central message of God’s Word. This is the truth Christ wants you to know above all else. Peter’s denial gets us to this truth.

At the end of Mark 14 it says: *“Then Peter called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times.’ And when he thought about it, he wept.”* We see what Peter is dwelling on: he *“called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him,”* when Jesus foretold his denial. This is why the **“I-tell-you-the-truth”** language is so important. Peter would call to mind that Jesus said this, then he would reflect and could deny that it was absolute truth. It happened just as Jesus said. Of all the gospels, Mark’s is the one in which Peter’s weeping is connected so directly to Jesus’ word.

Jesus’ word that Peter remembered was about predicting his denials. But that wasn’t all. In the same breath that Jesus said, **“All of you will be made to stumble,”** Peter too, He went on to say, **“After I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.”** This is the Gospel. It is the promise that He would rise from the dead, which would prove that His death completely paid for and forgave all their sins, including denying Him. On the third day after Jesus’ death they would find out that this promise came true exactly as Jesus had said too. Here too the apostles show their sinful weakness, their slowness to believe. But again it proves the truthfulness of the Bible. And they did believe, persuaded by Jesus’ resurrection appearances. They found it to be exactly as Jesus told them on this night. It’s another **“I-tell-you-the-truth,”** and it’s the best truth: that all sins are perfectly forgiven for the sake of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

The **“I-tell-you-the-truth”** about your sins is true, just as it was for Peter. You will find that the devil is an expert at using God’s Law to accuse you. You will be distressed by all the denying of Jesus that you’ve done in your life; you will wonder how a sinner like you can be forgiven; you will have a guilty conscience that makes you weep when you remember what God in His Word says about sins against Him. But that is not the whole truth.

In His Word – and in the Word He sends your pastor to say to you – God says in Christ He forgives all your sins. This is the truth He wants you to know most of all. His Word of forgiveness is true. This is why Peter did not despair to the point of suicide like Judas did. He believed the Gospel that Jesus spoke to him. You are not only like the apostles in being a wretched sinner. You are also like them in having the same Savior whom they walked and talked with. He comes to you – not in Galilee but in His Word and Sacraments, so you will not die in your sin but believe that He has put away your sin; it is no more. Amen!