

Many television shows begin with the phrase “previously,” in an attempt to catch you up on what has happened so far. So let me quickly review where we are in the last 24 hours of Jesus’ life before the crucifixion. Jesus and His disciples have met to share the Passover meal. Jesus shocked the disciples by assuming the role of a servant and washed their feet – feet that will desert Him within hours. Then with the breaking of the bread and the taking of the cup, Jesus transforms the Passover meal into the Lord’s Supper. During the meal several key things happen. First Jesus again shocks the disciples by announcing that one of them will betray Him. Of course, they all deny this, but later Judas slips out to fulfill the prophecy of betrayal. Then Peter boldly announces that while the rest of these guys may desert Jesus, he never will. In response, Jesus tells Peter that he will deny Him not only once, but three times before the night is over.

Following the meal, Jesus leads the disciples through the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Gethsemane where He prays with all His heart: “Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” When Jesus finishes praying, Judas arrives leading a mob of armed men from the Chief Priest and betrays Jesus with a kiss. Jesus is arrested, but not without incident. First Peter whacks off one of ears of a servant of the high priest with a sword, and then all the disciples desert Jesus, running scared into the night to save themselves.

Now let’s pick up the story with Jesus’ arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Mark, in verses 53-72.

Read Mark 14:53-72

There is a lot in this text and in Chapter 3 of Adam Hamilton’s book *24 Hours That Changed the World*. But in the time we have this morning, I want to focus on the reactions of three groups of people that particular night: the disciples, the Sanhedrin, and Peter. Let’s start with the disciples. The disciples during this period are an interesting study in human behavior. When Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the disciples are walking proudly beside Him as the crowd cheers Him. During the week, they are at His side as He teaches in the Temple. During the celebration of the Passover meal, they are all there with Him, letting Jesus wash their feet and serve them.

After the meal, they walk with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane, but then their true nature shows. Jesus asks them to pray with Him. In the loneliness that comes while awaiting death, Jesus longed for the presence of friends who would pray with Him. However, three times Jesus finds them sleeping, tired from all the events of the day and full of food and wine. They could not even stay awake for a few hours to pray with Him.

Now this is nothing compared to what happens next. Judas comes with the armed men of the Chief Priest to arrest Jesus. And what do the disciples do; they all desert Jesus and flee. *The Message* says: “All the disciples cut and ran.” At the first sign of danger, they all ran for the hills – forget that one-for-all, all-for-one speech at the dinner table earlier in the evening – now it was every man for himself. When everything was going well the disciples were right there beside Jesus, but at the first sign of trouble, they deserted Him to face arrest and the trial alone.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that Peter followed “at a distance.” *The Message* says: “He followed at a safe distance.” Luke tells us that during the crucifixion those who knew Jesus stood at a distance from the cross – at a distance, close enough to see, but far enough away to be safe and out of sight.

Now let’s look at the next group - the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish council comprised of seventy-one elders and teachers of the law who were considered to be among the wisest and most pious men of that time. They ruled over the religious affairs of the people just as the Romans ruled over their political and civil affairs. Under the Roman jurisdiction, the Sanhedrin was given a great deal of authority. They had certain police rights and duties in Jerusalem and even had their own police force, but they could not impose capital punishment. They were men who devoted themselves to God, and their high priest was the leading religious figure of his time. They normally met during the daytime in the Temple courts, and not during religious feasts. Thus, the fact that they gathered at night at the high priest’s palace during the Feast of Unleavened Bread to interrogate Jesus points to the secrecy and the illegal nature of this trial.

In his book, Adam Hamilton brings up an interesting point; one that I must admit that I had not considered or investigated before. Here is the Son of God, the Messiah, the long awaited One, coming to live among us – to teach us, to heal us, to show us what God is really like. But it is not the “so-called sinners of this world” who arrested and tried God’s Son when He walked among us; it was the most religious people at that time; it was the church that condemned the Savior to death. Now isn’t that ironic?

So here’s the question: “How could this happen?” How could seventy-one righteous men, dedicated to God, do what these men did? Why would they condemn an innocent man, the Son of God to death? The God that they claimed to serve walked among them in flesh, even stood right there before them, but they did not recognize who He was. They were so blinded by their love for power, prestige and traditions, and their fear of losing it all that they missed out on the opportunity to truly worship and get to know God and His Son. These men saw Jesus as a threat to their current way of life, their positions of authority, and their status among the Jewish people. They reacted out of fear and jealousy.

But this brings up another question: did all seventy-one men really agree with this decision; when was the last time you ever heard of everybody agreeing on something? Weren't there a few who realized that it was wrong to condemn this innocent man to the cross, the worst possible means of execution? Where were Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who both knew Jesus? Nicodemus was so intrigued with Jesus' teaching that he met separately with Jesus; however, it was in the secret of night. After Jesus' death, Joseph went to Pilate to ask for the body and with the assistance of Nicodemus buried Jesus in a new tomb. But John tells us that Joseph was a **secret** disciple of Jesus. Both Joseph and Nicodemus wanted to keep their relationship with Jesus a secret. So instead of standing up for Jesus, they followed the crowd and kept silent.

Of course this could not be said for Peter; it seems that Peter never kept quiet. Peter is one of my favorite Biblical characters; maybe because I'm a lot like him, always putting my foot in my mouth. During supper when Jesus tells the disciples that they will all desert Him, good old headstrong Peter, boldly declares that even if the other guys desert Jesus, he will be right there beside Him no matter what happens; he's got Jesus' back. Of course, Jesus then predicts that before the night is over, not only will all of them desert Him, but Peter will deny knowing Jesus not once, but three times. And just as Jesus said, before the rooster crows, Peter denied Jesus three times.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that when Peter denied knowing Jesus the third time, Jesus turned and looked straight at Peter; in other words, their eyes met. Can you imagine what that look must have felt like to Peter? Was it an "I told you so" look like a lot of us husbands get; was it a look of disappointment, hurt, sadness; or was it a look of betrayal and loneliness? Whatever it was, it was like a dagger to Peter's heart. He had failed the one person that he loved the most, and Luke tells us that Peter ran into the night crying.

Now there are the three groups – the disciples, the Sanhedrin, and good old Peter. Do you see yourself in any of these groups? Do we stand at a distance – a safe distance from Jesus? Standing at a distance can describe a lot of our relationships with Jesus. Sometimes we are guilty of erecting barriers between us and Jesus, even using the institution of the church and its rules and traditions as a wall. We like to keep Him at a safe distance; we don't want to get too close, because He just might rub off on us and change us; and that scares us. We like the status quo in our relationship.

However, Jesus did not call us to play it safe or stand at a distance like the disciples. Christianity is not a spectator sport – we are called to play daily on the Lord's team. He has empowered us to spread the Good News through our words and actions. We are called to live each day for the Lord. Instead of standing at a distance, a more modern translation would be staying in our comfort zone. In the Great Commission, Jesus said: "Go make disciples!" He didn't say sit; He

didn't say stay. What He really meant was get out of your pews, get out your homes, go into the world, your neighborhood and tell them about me. As individuals and communities of faith, we need walking shoes more than pew cushions. I don't know about you, but I can't keep the Good News inside me. I have to constantly be telling others about my Lord and Savior, and what He has done for me.

The Sanhedrin were the religious body of their day, but on that day the religious got it wrong. Are we the religious guilty of getting it wrong today? If we had been there, would we have done the same thing; joined in with the Sanhadrin? Do we condemn Jesus as individuals or as the church? Would we recognize Him if He walked in here today or would our preconceived notions about what He should look like or what a Christian should look like prevent us from welcoming Him and others?

Do we keep silent, follow the crowd? Are we secret disciples? Can people tell that we are Christians? I know that I have used this illustration before, but it's worth repeating. If you and I were put on trial this morning for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us? Would our friends, family or co-workers testify that they knew we were Christians by the way we acted or would they say: "A Christian; you've got to be kidding; they act just like the rest of us!"

Now sometimes we are too hard in our judgment of old Peter. You know it took courage to enter the courtyard of the high priest that night. What would we have done in the same situation? It's a lot easier to pass judgment 2000 years later than to be sitting around the courtyard fire and people pointing their fingers at you. Even if he denied Jesus, Peter's heart was in the right place.

And our hearts may be in the right place, but like Peter we can get so comfortable in our relationship with the Lord that we don't realize that we are slipping away, denying that we know Him. We do it in so many different ways - our lifestyle, our words, our actions, our decisions. We can look religious on Sunday mornings, but like a new car driving off the dealer's parking lot, our values can change as quickly as we get onto Golf Course Road. Jesus calls us to follow Him. Instead of denying Him, we should deny ourselves daily, and take up our cross and follow Him.

One of my favorite western movies is *The Alamo*. If you visit the Alamo in San Antonio, you will find on the wall near the main entrance a portrait with the following inscription: "James Butler Bonham – no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle." It was placed there by the family so that people might know the appearance of the man who died for freedom. Likewise, no literal picture of

Jesus exists either. But the likeness of the Son who makes us free can and must be seen in the lives of His faithful followers; we are called to witness for Him each day in how we live our lives.

Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow Him. He wants us to be His light in the world around us; we must let our light shine before others so that the Father may be glorified. Are we doing our best for Jesus and letting our light shine through us, or do we hide the light through our denial and rejection of Jesus? During Lent ask yourself this question: "Can I look Jesus in the eye?" Amen