



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Stumbling rock  
Proper 17, Year A  
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Poor Peter.

It was only last week where he and Jesus had a real moment together. See, Jesus has been making a name for himself, and it's not altogether a good one. Sure, people know who he is, but the room gets quiet when he walks in, the people cough and look away and some do that thing where they make a loud statement to try and make it look like they haven't just been talking about him. People in his home town snub him, say he's getting a big head. Teenage girls giggle and point when he walks by, the mysteries of their affections known sometimes to themselves and never to others. Jesus has started avoided walking by the police, and after that bad business with the pigs, the pork industry has him labelled as some fanatic Jewish PETA activist.

Jesus, under the weight of the whispers, sits down with his friends.

“You guys hear people talking about me. What are they saying?”

The group of friends does their own coughing, shuffling, eye avoiding ritual as they mentally filter out some of the harsher details. “A lot of folks think you're a prophet of some kind,” Bartholomew says gently. “Yeah,” offers James, “and a few say you're Elijah reincarnated!” Andrew, gaining courage, blurts out, “Or even John the Baptist, back from the dead!” They frown at Andrew. “Now how do you figure that? John literally just died and Jesus has been around the entire time! Did he just transmogrify suddenly into Jesus?” And they began to bicker.

Jesus speaks up again, and they go silent at the tone of his voice. “But who do you do think I am?” The plaintive vulnerability of the man they aspire to be is too much. Peter finally speaks up.

“You're the Messiah. You're the son of the living God.”

You know the story. Bingo, right answer, Jesus blesses Peter, tells him that he is Cephas, the rock on which he will build his church, numero uno, here, take these keys to the kingdom.

Without getting into abuses of power men have justified on the basis of that verse alone, without pointing out that being handed the keys to the kingdom includes zero provision for Peter's successors, or the damage that has been done to the church from interpreting that verse into infallibility for a guy in Rome, without delving into the injustice of emphasizing one man's power from one single verse over the *tomos* of verses that bless the lame, the blind, the meek, the broken hearted, without getting into any of that lest you think I'm irreparably reformed in my ecclesiology — well, let's just leave it that last week, Peter had a moment. Not only was he was right, he was handed the keys to the kingdom.

Interpretations of this verse tend to forget that the keys are yanked from Peter in the next story quicker than the keys were yanked from your teenage hands when you tried to sneak in past curfew only to hear the unmistakable clearing of your dad's throat who has been sitting in the dark for hours mounting in anger. That is how quickly those keys are taken.

In our story today, Jesus starts to expand on what Messiahship means. He says it looks like suffering. Discipleship looks like dying. Talk about a mood killer. Now, Peter has kinda let the new keys thing go to his head. He puts the keys in the ignition, revs the engine a bit, tells Jesus to get in and ride, lighten up a bit. Bro, God loves you and has a good plan for your life.

Poor Peter.

You saw what happened. In one week, from rock to stumbling block. From Superman to Satanman. From pope to nope, one week. The point is: what Peter just said he believed about Jesus wasn't enough. You believe in Jesus as Messiah? Great! But what sort of Messiah is it you believe in? What sort of God is it you believe in? What are you going to do with that belief?

Satan, in scripture, is not the embodiment of all evil. Satan is not so much a name as a description, not of evil, but of tempting. Of deception. Of offering another way, an easier way, something less painful and more convenient and just as effective with half the cost. With his way, you just have to lie a little to get there, cut the corners, inflate the numbers, turn a blind eye.

Jesus isn't calling Peter evil. He's calling him a tempter. And it is tempting, to think the Christian life ought to be where suffering can't reach you — rather than the place you'll experience it more fully than anywhere else, where your picture-perfect narrative will be completely disrupted because you're asked to look at the brokenness and go towards it and put your hands in it, to dig in to this thing that you'd do just about anything to avoid. And I mean both the brokenness in the world and in yourself.

Of course, the Christian story is that it's in that place where you find God. Any other way of describing Christianity is a deception.

A young friend of mine is losing her faith. She was raised in much the same vague Christianity that I was, no church, just a belief in a loving God who made everything and sent good people to heaven and bad people to hell, and we were good people, so not to worry. Like all of us, she grew old enough to ask the question of why bad things happen to good people if God is so great and loving, and unlike you all, she doesn't know where to turn with questions like these. Unlike me at her age, she isn't single-mindedly obsessed enough with the question to dedicate everything to finding its answer.

There are faiths worth losing. There are faiths one has to lose in order to grow up even a little, painful and disorienting as it is. Personally, I went towards deism after losing that faith — the clockwork God who wound up the universe and now leaves it alone to tick along as it will. But even then, the person of Jesus wouldn't leave me alone — the God who suffers with us, the God who brings resurrection out of the most dead parts of our lives. I lived long enough to see that pattern and to begin to trust it, and every once in awhile now, I can trust it even when it's not completely after the fact.

What sort of God is it that you believe in? What will you do with that belief?