

**Rooster Reverie**  
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Grace Presbyterian Church  
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Mark 8: 34-35

Mark 14: 26-31, 66-72

During our church group's recent visit to Nablus, it seemed as though we were eating pretty much 24/7, as our hosts filled to nearly overflowing our plates, our bellies, and our spirits. I genuinely wondered if I would ever want food again. But it didn't stop me from having a craving—after just 2 nights in Nablus, I found myself with a burning yearning for ...fried chicken. Not just any chicken, though. It was a very particular craving for the crispy deliciousness of the rooster that started up his cacophonous chorus outside our bedroom window at 3 o'clock each morning. His crowing wasn't intermittent, it was constant and insistent. As I lay there in the predawn darkness listening to his roosterly racket, the story from our scripture lesson came—not just to mind—but very much to life, for me.

It is said that a visit to the Holy Land--(or as the Anglican/Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem calls it, "the Land of the Holy One"—I like that better) —a visit to Israel and Palestine is like the fifth gospel, bringing to life in fresh ways the other four. You actually see the geography, hear the sounds, walk where Jesus and his followers walked; you get a sense of scale and distance, of dryness and heat.

So, when you hear a rooster in the Nablus night for example, the scripture recounting Peter's denial becomes more real, more...emotionally three dimensional, if that's a thing.

Sleep not being an option during the predawn serenade, it set me to thinking. And 3 am thoughts are not the most coherent thoughts, more a series of snapshots or impulses, so I'll try to share, as best I can, the drowsy drift of my thinking.

You may recall the sermon text from Mark 8 a few weeks back, when Jesus first told his disciples how his earthly ministry would play out: "The Son of man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again." Peter earnestly rebuked him: It must not be so!

And in response, Jesus said to Peter and the others, "If any want to become my followers, let them DENY THEMSELVES, and TAKE UP THEIR CROSS, and follow me.

In my sermon at the time, I spoke about what taking up a cross means.

Public crucifixions were commonplace in Jesus' day, Rome's way of squashing dissent and repressing anyone who would question the authority of the Roman government. So what Jesus is saying is— "If you would truly follow me, it is going to involve confronting power. You can't just go along with the way things are, keep your head down, accept the unacceptable. You're going to have to set aside your security, your comfort (that is, deny your self-interest), and live out your faith in ways that may prove challenging or costly to you. Take up your cross, and follow me."

Now, as we come to today's scripture lesson, Jesus is dining with his disciples in the upper room on the night of his betrayal, and he says to them, "When the chips are down, you aren't going to be able to follow where I go. You will all become deserters." Peter impulsively replies, "Even though **everyone else** falls away, I will not."

And Jesus replies to Peter, "This very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

Now—I never quite captured this sense of what Jesus is saying. I mentioned that the rooster in Nablus crowed every night. EVERY NIGHT, three am, it was like clockwork. What Jesus is saying is, "You're saying you won't fall away? That you'll deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me? No—it won't be yourself you deny.

It will be me. And your denial of me will be as routine as the crow of a rooster...that is how predictable your denial will be. And before the rooster crows twice—do you remember how I said that the rooster's crowing was nearly CONTINUOUS, one crow after another after another—before the rooster can crow twice, you will deny me three times.

That is how quickly, how easily, how glibly your denials will come.

Peter, you're saying that when the chips are down, you'll be there? I'm telling you that you will fold like a cheap suit. I'm telling you that your principles, your convictions are not nearly as strong as you imagine that they are." That, it seems to me, is what Jesus is saying.

And of course, we know the story—when the prospect of ACTUAL CROSS BEARING confronts him, Peter does not deny himself or his self-interest. He denies Jesus.

But here is where my thoughts turned. The reason Peter's denial is so predictable, that it comes at the drop of a hat or at the crow of a rooster—is that the impulse to deny Jesus, that is to not follow where he calls or where he leads, is so universal. Jesus says to his disciples, you ALL will become deserters; the only reason that this story about Peter's denial is in the Bible in the first place is because he insisted that he wouldn't fall away.

So, then I came to the difficult question—would I do any differently, would I behave any better, would I deny myself in the same circumstance? I would WANT to behave differently, Peter WANTS to behave differently: “Even though they ALL fall away, I will not.”

But in Romans, the apostle Paul captures so clearly the disconnect between what we desire and what we actually do, the difference between knowing what is right and doing what is right.

“I do not understand my own actions,” Paul writes. “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

Now the rooster kept on crowing, so I kept on thinking. What does denying Jesus look like, in our lives, in MY life?

I suppose one way of denying Jesus is to do as Peter does, that is, to say that we don’t even know Jesus. But another way, a different way, a deeper form of denial is to say that we KNOW Jesus, but not to demonstrate any impact of knowing Jesus in our lives, our choices, our way of living in the world.

It is to make knowing Jesus a matter of intellectual assent or personal salvation but never to take up a cross and follow. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” To reiterate what I said before—that’s a political statement: remember, the cross was a way of putting down dissent, so it means that lived faith is going to bring us into conflict with power, with “the powers.”

Why? Because power often acts in its own interest, privilege often seeks to maintain and to multiply itself, while Jesus aligned himself with the powerless and the underprivileged, the least of these, taking special interest in their welfare.

German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in one of his sermons: “Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear, rather than too much. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.”

.... Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.

Now, in weeks to come, we as a congregation will be hearing more about the experiences of our group that traveled to Israel and Palestine. The group will host a dinner here at the church on November 4, share some traditional Palestinian dishes that we enjoyed, and tell you of some of the things that we saw and experienced: our visits to some of the sites that hold religious significance for us, as well as the people we encountered and the conditions we witnessed. It was, for me, a bit of a disheartening experience. While visiting Father Ibrahim's church in Jordan, I saw a poster on the wall that quoted Psalm 122:6—Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. But peace seems such a fragile thing—so hard to come by. I was reminded of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem in Luke 19:

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." And it occurred to me how true Jesus' lament remains nearly 2000 years later—everyone we met spoke of peace and yearned for peace but there were tensions everywhere, and peacekeeping seemed more in evidence than peacemaking.

Checkpoints, such as the one you see onscreen, were everywhere—the experience of being stopped and interrogated and searched is a daily reality of Palestinian life. Israeli citizens and foreigners are not similarly scrutinized. And the situation is complex—the need for some level of security cannot be disputed, as on the day we departed for home two Israeli citizens were killed by a Palestinian gunman in a West Bank factory.

But I personally am challenged by the Bonhoeffer quote: "Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong." Our group had two experiences with the checkpoints during our visit. In the first, we were leaving the West bank on a bus, bound for Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee. We were detained for fully half an hour while the soldiers at the checkpoint scrutinized the papers of our Palestinian tour guide. One of the soldiers stood with his finger on the trigger of his weapon the entire time, a subtle assertion of power that felt a bit overdone given the context of an American tour group. At one point, our bus driver moved down the aisle of the bus handing out candy to our group members, and the soldier shouted "WHERE IS THE DRIVER!" The treatment was never overtly discourteous—but it felt as though it was a power play, like the line between a necessary delay and a needless one was deliberately pressed. At last, after requiring two of our group to present our suitcases for inspection, we were permitted to pass.

The second experience was a bit more frustrating because it felt much more personal—we were in the city of Hebron, which felt like an armed camp. In Hebron, Israeli settlers and Palestinian Arabs live in close proximity to each other. The Palestinian market has screen wire above it because the settlers in the illegal settlement above throw rocks and garbage down on the Arab shoppers below. This

photograph by Alan Goldstein documents one especially repugnant practice. The settlers will fill bottles of urine, loosen the caps to assure a slow drip, and throw them down on the wire to leak over the merchants and their merchandise. The goal is to drive the shopkeepers from Hebron. Given the number of shuttered shops, the practice is having some success.

Palestinians entering and leaving the market must pass through several checkpoints. At one of these, our guide, the tour company owner, was stopped as we were on our way back to the bus. He was told that our group could walk down the street to the bus, which was in sight. But he, our guide, would have to walk a more circuitous route through a neighborhood—he would not be permitted to walk down the street with us. Speaking to the soldier at the checkpoint, Susan Wilder politely asked, “Help me to understand why our guide cannot walk with us?” The soldier replied, “You don’t need to understand.” There are precautions—and then there is harassment. The daily experience of many Palestinians, especially in Hebron—is harassment, and apartheid-like conditions that show the clear distinction between the things that make for security and the things that make for peace.

Now—these were only my experiences and observations. But to go back to where my thoughts on being a follower of Jesus have led me: I cannot unsee what I saw...and so I am left with two options. I can do or say nothing based upon my observations, which is to condone what I saw or to say it is too complicated for me to form an opinion. And that route costs me nothing. But as holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has noted,

“We must take *sides*. Neutrality helps the *oppressor*, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.”

Sometimes we must take up a cross—or a cause.

And interference is not on the side of one people or another, but it is an intervention on behalf of fairness, of justice, and of peace. Striving toward fairness and justice and peace means that I need to become more educated. I need to read more broadly, and open my eyes wider rather than closing them. I need to pray more regularly, remembering the words of Psalm 122: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. And when there are policy matters in Israel and Palestine that are before our congressional representatives—I need to work to understand them thoroughly and to voice my concern for justice and for fairness and for peace.

In the meantime, as a sign of encouragement in the midst of a discouraging situation—because travelers who had visited before said that conditions were worse, the encroachment of the settlements progressing, the incivility advancing—as a sign of hope that does spring eternal, I recall this rock from the Tent of Nations, the Palestinian farm that sits ringed about by settlements. Its inscription is inspirational:

We refuse to be enemies. Whatever the cost, whatever the labor, we choose the harder course of peace.

So that's a hodgepodge of thoughts set astir by a rooster and pre-dawn thoughts of denial.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny **themselves** and take up their cross and follow me."

Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.

Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.

Yet and still, we refuse to be enemies.

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem. Amen