

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church**  
**Knoxville, Tennessee**  
**Dr. Jay Howell**  
April 5, 2020

**“With Every Intention”**  
**Mark 14:66-72**

I am grateful to our friends at First Presbyterian and at Fountain City Presbyterian, and to my friends Jeff and Andy for their inspired preaching the past two Sundays. As we begin this Holy Week, I hope all of you joining us have been edified by our worship together as I have. It has turned out better than we could have planned or intended.

When we all started this combined worship service, we knew that whatever it was that we had respectively planned, what had been planned at First Pres, what had been planned at Fountain City, what had been planned at Sequoyah Hills, we knew that we were in a different time now, and what we had planned, what we had intended was not necessarily where the Spirit was leading us. During Lent, here at Sequoyah Hills, we had every intention to go through Mark chapter 14, looking at how systematically our Lord was betrayed by those closest to him, and yet he presses forward anyway, ultimately coming to this passage on this week, which incidentally was also to be our Confirmation Sunday, when we celebrate the faith confirmed in some of our young people.

That’s what we had intended to do, but we realized that perhaps wasn’t what God was leading us to hear in this season, so we quickly dropped our walk through Mark 14, and it was a no brainer. But now for this day, I felt this compulsion, this leading, to come back to the text we had intended for this day in worship, but for altogether different reasons.

Will you pray with me?

*Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.*

You know I think we should at least give Peter a little credit. Usually any discussion of Peter, especially around Holy Week, sounds like this: he was brash, he was impulsive, he was presumptuous. In his own mind at least, he thought he was this faithful follower, the first among Jesus’ disciples. But then when it really counted, he didn’t quite measure up. Peter is confronted three times if he knew Jesus, and he denies it three times, proving that for all his bravado, his faithfulness to his Master really wasn’t all that faithful.

That’s what it usually sounds like when we talk about Peter. But I think we should at least give Peter a little credit, and this is why. Where’s everybody else?

The last we hear of everybody else, in Mark’s telling of this story at least—John tells it a little different—is that they all deserted Jesus when he was arrested. Who knows where they ran to? They were staying in the nearby town of Bethany, which was outside the city, so my guess is they fled back there, to a safe house, to regroup, to get out of danger.

And make no mistake; they were in danger. Over and over they had seen Jesus grapple with the scribes and the priests. They knew the kind of tension Jesus had brought to the city, especially during this Passover festival. He was one some would call a prophet, one others would

call Messiah, one that just a few days earlier had been hailed by a royal procession into the city, with cries of Hosanna, “Save now!” invoking the coming kingdom of David, and those are dangerous words to use. Dangerous because words like Hosanna were a threat to the Romans and those the Romans had put in power like, say, the high priest, who didn’t become high priest through a holy ritual; he became high priest because a Roman prefect appointed him, gives him these sweet digs, a palace in the middle of the city.

It was dangerous to follow someone who threatened the established order that way, so unless you thought you were backing the right horse, you wouldn’t just do it for kicks. But when your guy gets arrested in the middle of the night, they may not stop at just arresting the leader and doing who knows what else to him. They may come after you too. It doesn’t take long for you to think, I’ve made a huge mistake, and if they take your leader that way, back into the city, you’re gonna go the other way. And that’s what the disciples did.

But Peter doesn’t. He follows Jesus. He follows at a distance, as Mark notes a little earlier, but while everybody else fled, Peter does follow. He goes back into the city, to the high priest’s palace, and sits down in the courtyard below the place where Jesus was being tried, sits down around a fire *with the guards*. But he’s there. And where’s everybody else? Hiding. So I think Peter deserves at least a little credit, at least an attendance award. It took some courage to go into that courtyard.

And what was he doing there? That’s hard to say. It’s not like Peter’s doing Jesus any good sitting out in the courtyard; he’s not going to spring him from the pen. Just from how things turned out, it’s hard to say what Peter had intended to do. Maybe he legitimately meant that he wouldn’t abandon Jesus no matter what, as he had said a few hours earlier. Who knows? But I do think it would be safe to say that Peter didn’t go into that courtyard, putting himself at further risk, intending to deny even knowing Jesus. He had gone into that courtyard with every intention of staying faithful to his master.

And so, when the high priest’s servant girl recognizes him and points him out as one of Jesus’ followers, we can only imagine the wheels turning quickly in his head. She studies his face and says, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.” Remember Peter’s sitting by the fire with the high priest’s guards right there, so imagine the looks he got from the men with swords and clubs, some of whom might have been a part of the crowd that arrested Jesus a few hours earlier. They start looking him over, wondering if they’ve seen him before.

So before they get the chance, he denies it flatly, saying “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” gets up and relocates. He’s still in great danger, but he doesn’t run; he’s still there. He just tells a little fib to avoid suspicion. Surely, we can forgive him for that. A rooster crows not far away, but who pays attention to that?

The servant girl doesn’t let up. She starts pointing him out to some of the other people there. So again he denies it. A little time goes by, he maybe thinks the threat has passed, but then some of those other people bring it up again, recognizing his accent. I can only think he’s starting to panic. This time he ups the ante, because he needs to put this to rest. He can’t have people calling him out all while he’s surrounded by guards, all while the person he’s associated with is being tried and beaten upstairs. So he curses and swears an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.”

As if on cue, the rooster crows again, and it dawns on him, Jesus had said this would happen. And he realizes what he’s done. He’s denied the man whom he had said he would follow no matter what. Denied even knowing him. Did it three times. He never meant for that to happen. He couldn’t really say what he had hoped to accomplish by following Jesus into that courtyard,

but he definitely didn't go in there intending to forsake him. He went all that way, put himself at risk, with every intention of staying steadfast to his Lord, but he gets caught up, and out of fear out of panic out of self-preservation, he does what he thought he incapable of doing. He denies him.

Didn't matter what he had intended. In the end, he fell away too.

There was a bit of that going around, and despite the most earnest intentions, people fell away.

Just a few days earlier, a crowd had gathered at the gates of the city to hail the arrival of a promising prospect. It was someone who had come from the countryside, and there were stories of how he had healed, how he had taught of the coming kingdom of God, and there were whispers that he could be the Messiah, the real deal, the one to restore the people of Israel to their land and their kingdom. And they heard he was coming into the city, at Passover no less. This could really be happening, they thought.

They go out to meet him, and it's truly a sight to behold. He comes in on a colt. They lay their cloaks down in the street. They wave branches in the air. They go ahead of him and they follow behind him hailing him in the way you would welcome a king. And they had every intention of riding this wave, of seeing this man throw off the shackles of their oppressors. They didn't go into it intending to hail him one day and call out for his death another. But it didn't matter what they had intended. In the end, they fell away too.

We are reminded, this week in particular, that no matter our intentions, we fall away as well.

Nearly six weeks ago—can anybody even remember back that far?—we began the Season of Lent, and at Sequoyah Hills at least, on Ash Wednesday we read a passage at the beginning of Mark 14, about how a woman with an alabaster jar anointed Jesus, preparing him for his burial, a somewhat extravagant display for a pretty grim purpose, a sign of his death. In that Ash Wednesday service, we were reminded of our own mortality, that our days are fleeting, but also of our sinfulness, the very reason for our mortality, the very reason that creation itself is corrupted, the very reason for the need for Christ's death in the first place. It's a reminder of the very reason for our great need for redemption, the reason that we, like the crowd in Jerusalem, cry out for a Savior.

But despite all the reminders, despite all the forewarning, despite all the intentions, we fall away.

There might be a bit of that going around these days too.

In church circles, and this is almost a bit irreverent in light of all the hardship around the world, but the effects of the pandemic have been noted by some to have created the Lentiest Lent that ever Lented. This season when we are invited to pause, to reflect on our own mortality, our own sinfulness, to strip away the distractions that we might redirect our attention to God, I mean my goodness. Today the things we would normally fill our time with, work, school, leisure, have all been changed or taken away. And in that initial burst of transition, I could sense in the frenzy of activity that came before all the activity ceasing, a trend of reorientation. It's an encouraging trend, don't get me wrong, folks who otherwise may not have paid attention to anything to do with faith or God or Jesus are now looking for answers, looking for comfort, folks for whom faith had long been dormant are now rediscovering its necessity and reality in this time of crisis.

But at the same time there are hints of all the best intentions being caught up in the moment, of waving branches in praise out of desperation for a Savior, only to ditch them later on. And it only seems to follow the same trend as Peter in the courtyard, showing courage in the

courtyard but in a panic denying his Lord, the same trajectory as the crowd, crying out for a Savior on one day, and crying out for his death on the other.

This week, of all weeks, even in the midst of this crisis, when so much is shaken, when so many of us are looking for comfort, it is of vital importance that we not seek refuge in platitudes and simple comforts but to remember again that this is our natural state: to cry out to the Lord one day, and forsake him the next.

The point is not to discourage us, but to put our faith in the right things, not in some newfound sense of piety or a rediscovered faith, because if Palm Sunday is a reminder of anything it is that piety often peters out, faith often fails, and courage only lasts so long in a courtyard.

But that wasn't the only thing going on in the high priest's palace that night.

While the disciples hid far away, Jesus was exposed. While Peter's faith failed, Jesus showed us what faithfulness really looks like. While the crowd's intentions on Palm Sunday had already seemed to give way to bloodlust, Jesus showed us what he had every intention to do: that despite every betrayal, every abandonment, every instance of cruelty and pain inflicted on him, his faithfulness would not waver.

And he shows us that still today.

He shows us that even when we get caught up in panic, the weight of the world does not lie on our shoulders but on his. He shows us that even when the most steadfast among us enter into stretches of doubt and pain, he says you can rest knowing I took the blows for you. He shows us that even we weep knowing that we are not as faithful as we thought we were, he says it is in me and not in yourselves that your hope is found, and I go that you may have life, and that abundantly.

Friends, we go into a hard week this week, not just liturgically, not just because we're going to think about Christ's crucifixion, about his death on the cross, about our sinfulness that put him there, we go into a hard week this week because of the continued escalation of sickness and death around us. Whether you have a set of notifications on your phone, or whether you can't pry yourself away from your Facebook feed, or whether you keep watching the news, this week will most likely be a grim series of reminders that all is not well, and despite every intention you may have this morning to go into this new week with renewed faith, when faced with the onslaught of hard news in the world, you may find your faith failing.

Take courage, friends, for it is not upon your faithfulness that the redemption of the world depends.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**