

## “Stay With Us Through the Night”

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Luke 22:14-23, 31-33

Rev. Kimberly Heath  
Wall Street United Church

It was a dark and stormy night. Actually it probably wasn't. But I bet it felt that way. It was the night of the Last Supper, the final meeting of Jesus and his disciples -- the night he was betrayed.

There are so many elements to this night that are recorded in each of the gospels. Recently one little verse jumped out at me for the first time in this very familiar story. That's what I love about reading the Bible. Even if you have heard a passage of scripture over and over, the text is alive and each time you read it, the Holy Spirit will show you something different. That's what happened to me. I noticed a verse in Luke's version I had never noticed before in chapter 22: 31-32. This is when Jesus foretells Peter's denial. *“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,”* and here is the verse I had never noticed *“but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers”*

Dark and stormy nights happen in life. Every person has times of testing and trial. Every person messes up sometime. Sometimes it's a royal mess up. It was for Peter.

Simon Peter was probably Jesus' star student. His faith and his intentions were great. When Jesus tells Peter that Satan wants to sift him like wheat and that he has prayed for him, Peter's response is *“Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!”* I have no doubt that he was.

Do you remember in the garden when Judas and the crowd come to arrest Jesus? Peter does not shrink back. He is ready to fight and I am sure he is ready to die. He draws his sword and cuts off the ear of a servant of the high priest. A battle was about to erupt. A burning ember had been thrown on very dry grass. You can just feel the tension in the air. Clearly both sides were armed and ready; maybe in that adrenalin-filled moment they even looked forward to the release in violence. It would have been bloody. Some would have died that night in the garden. But just before a full-blown fight explodes; Jesus calms the storm. He rebukes Peter, in some versions he heals the ear of the victim and he surrenders himself to those who came to arrest him.

The thing that I find interesting is that I really do believe that had a battle blown up at that point, Peter would have remained firmly a Jesus man. He would have fought until captured or killed. If he was afraid he

wouldn't have shown it. This would have been his hour. But that's not how it turned out. We often think that the enemy will put us up against some great battle to test us, but usually he goes for something much, much smaller and more insignificant.

It was when Peter was alone, tired and unsuspecting that it happened. A simple, innocent statement from a servant girl: "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." Alone, tired, afraid and caught off guard, the lie just slipped out: "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." Once he started with the lie he had to defend it again or he'd look like an idiot when that same servant girl said to some others "He was one of them". When another bystander said to Peter "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean", the Bible says "He began to curse and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." "And that moment", the scriptures go on to say "the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept." (Mark 14:68, 70-72)

Of course it was the simplicity of it all that devastated Peter. I mean had he run away in battle for fear of being killed, no one would have blamed him. He wouldn't have been hailed a hero, but neither would he have been shamed for not wanting to be stabbed to death. But to not have the courage to tell a servant-girl and some other nobodies the truth that Jesus was his friend, his best friend ... there was just no excuse for that kind of cowardliness, that kind of betrayal. A voice he'd heard before whispered "*You're weak, you're a coward, you're a failure. You don't deserve to be his friend*". If Peter had been a recovering alcoholic, that's when he would have picked up the bottle again.

Dark and stormy nights happen. Whether it is because you have experienced a loss of a loved one or a job or breakdown of a relationship, we have times when it feels like the rug has been pulled out from underneath us. And sometimes it's our own fault. I think those times are the hardest to get up from.

It's almost to be expected on this rough path with a heavy cross on the journey towards a life of freedom and healing and joy that we fall, or lose our way at some point. That's not the issue.

The issue is: *will you come back?*

That's why I love that verse. ***Luke 22:32 "...but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."***

I believe Jesus told Peter that he prayed for him in order to give him hope in that dark time. Notice the next part "...and you, when once you have turned back... strengthen your brothers." What's the important part of that phrase? At first glance it's the 'strengthen your brothers' bit, but I think the key part was **'you come back, you hear! I still have work for you. You come back!'**

You see, Jesus knows how dangerous that dark place is. As powerful as Jesus' prayers for Peter were, Peter was the only one who could choose the light or the dark. Peter was the only one who could choose to take that difficult, humiliating and faltering first step back on the path to Jesus and to life -- or to curl up in the fetal position and say "Let the light around me become night".

My theory and gut hunch—and you can argue with me about this one—is that at one point both Judas and Peter were on a level playing ground. I believe that both Judas and Peter had an equal chance of coming back. Both would have been welcomed back, but only one of them made it back.

It's not about how good a person you are. It's not about whether you are a straight A Christian or more of a C, D or F Christian. It's about whether you will choose to come back when you fail and when you fall or when you've had a loss knock you down. It's about whether you will choose to name the whispers of the enemy a lie, and to hear and believe the *Still Small Voice* of God.

You can be saved. The **Way** through the dark and stormy nights of our life is Jesus. Jesus accepted the cup that the Father gave to him, Jesus surrendered to the crowd, Jesus went through the torture, the humiliation, and he died in a brutal way on a cross because of you. Not because you are good or perfect, or strong, or in control, or adored by the world but because you are weak; you are broken and imperfect; you are out of control and disliked. **And, and...**because he *loves you*. Never forget the 'and'!

It was not just Jesus who died and rose to life that week. Peter also had a small death when he failed and betrayed Jesus, but by the grace of God he chose to come back. By the grace of God he faced his failure, found forgiveness and experienced his own resurrection.

I don't know what journey you are going through that requires a resurrection. There is a group of us studying Bishop Tutu's *The Book of Forgiving*, and one of the hard things we've learned is that the path to forgiveness goes through the valley of facing and naming the hurt that was done to us. There is always a chance that we will stumble and fall on that

journey to forgiveness as we face again our failure and the hurts of others. But we have also learned that as you keep walking, you will find forgiveness and life and healing.

This week if we enter into the Christian story we will be walking through a dark valley. But this valley ends in life. At times the valley feels very dark; but keep walking.

Choose to come back. Choose to reach out to Jesus. Choose to keep walking through that dark valley of the shadow of death. It's not an easy thing to do. It wasn't for Peter. But if you do, you will find what you're looking for deep down. You will find healing, you will find hope, you will find life. Peter experienced a resurrection. He experienced the resurrection of Jesus—but he also experienced his own resurrection. Peter was forever changed that week from a failure to a follower and someone Jesus could really build his church on.

You won't be the same on the other side of your dark valley either, but you will find life. New life. Hold on to that promise that no matter how much you hurt, no matter how much of a failure you feel you are. Jesus loves you and he will walk beside you through the dark valley and lead you to life. That life is worth all the pain in the world. Thanks be to God.