

CrossRoad
“Judas and Peter”
(Fifth Sunday in Lent)

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Digging Deeper

***CrossRoad*: “Judas and Peter”**

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Matthew 27:1-10; Matthew 26:14-30, 69-75; Luke 22:6; Zechariah 11:12-13; 2 Peter 3:9; John 17:12

Introduction

Betray, deny, and abandon — three critical verbs in the Lenten narrative which reveal the moral failures of key figures in the last days of the earthly Jesus. Each verb has an agent, a subject who is responsible for the specified action, respectively, Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter, and the rest of the disciples. Nobody gets a pass in the searing light of the gospel writers. They all shrank from the hard demands of following the man who was crucified. They all stood at the *CrossRoad*. Jesus, as it turns out, was not surprised by any of them. In a critical incident from both Mark and Matthew, we read the fully informed prediction of Jesus:

²⁶ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ "You will all fall away," [*Matthew adds, "on account of me"*] Jesus told them, "for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'" ²⁸ But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (Mark 14:26-28; Matthew 26:30).

His authority for saying this is none other than the Prophet Zechariah's words a half-century before (13:7). Both evangelists use the same Greek verb, translated in our English texts as "fall away": *skanadlizō*, which elsewhere the Bible applies to the "scandal of the cross" which people trip over because of the shame it represents. And so we might alternately render this, "You will be scandalized on account of me." The cross is the striking of the shepherd, Jesus, and the disciples to the last man are frightened, disoriented, and leaderless sheep. Yet, not all of them would be scandalized in the same way. It is interesting that the writers do not use the more common term *apostasia*, "apostasy," for this reactive response of the disciples since that term has stronger and more deadly connotations which are later adopted by the church to describe followers who lose their faith and eternal life.

The theme of abandonment is a double-edged sword in the hours leading to Jesus' death. We have a deep sense of this from John's gospel where Jesus himself acknowledges that *he* is "going away" and his disciples would look for him and not find him:

"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come" (John 13:33).

Fully aware of the abandonment anxiety accompanying his sudden departure into death, Jesus provides guidance for the coming loss in John 14, 15, and 16, introduced by the words

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14:1-4).

Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief (John 16:6).

We commonly reach for this text during our own loss and bereavement of loved ones, an application I fully accept, and yet the immediate context is the crucifixion of Jesus which for him is "the way to the place where I am going." *The cross is the way*; there is no other way for Jesus, and so the disciples despair of meeting up with him again. In three chapters of John's gospel (14-17), our Lord lays the foundation for moving beyond the immediate crisis of losing Jesus, but he also knows that any further *explanations* "they cannot bear now"

(16:12). However, he promises his return from death and also the coming of the Holy Spirit who will make all things clear at the proper time.

In the days leading up to the crucifixion, Jesus reveals the whole truth about his coming date with destiny. In response the disciples are resistant and object with refusals about the outcome of the cross. Mark's account offers the first clear example of this foreshadowing and with it the refusal of Peter that no doubt reflected the attitude of his companions who remain silent:

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mark 8:31-33).

What's striking about this exchange is how Jesus' reference to his "rising after three days" escapes the disciples who choose rather to debate his coming death as expressed in the words of Peter. To them the idea that Jesus "must be killed" is more incredible than the miracle of his resurrection. The "scandal" and stumbling block of his prediction is not Easter, but Good Friday and the cross. The fact that Peter "rebukes" Jesus reveals not merely the objection of his followers but the deep anger about the fate of their master. We will have more to say about Peter's moral crisis in our remarks which follow.

One more text uncovers the disaffection of those who followed Jesus with regard to his coming death. It belongs to the wider account in John's gospel of the feeding of the five thousand. On that occasion Jesus uses the idea of consuming the gift of heavenly bread to teach how he would give away his flesh and blood for the life of the world:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. (John 6:51).

...
On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (John 6:60).

...
⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

⁶⁷ "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

⁷⁰ Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" ⁷¹ (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.) (John 6:66-71).

"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" — That sentence is followed by "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." What was "hard" about the saying which these "disciples," other than the Twelve, found critically disturbing? The answer is thickly layered, but includes the notion that Jesus would die so that his body might nourish the life of the world. Read too literally by them, perhaps they imagined a ritual consumption far too horrific for Jewish sensibilities to allow. Or, read more freely, perhaps they understood by it the need for Jesus to die in order to bring life to others. In either case they took great offense at his words. Of special interest for our study this week is the two-fold reference to *Peter and Judas* in the same context. Both men are chosen by Jesus to make up the Twelve. Peter, in response to Jesus' concern that they will all leave him, hastily reaffirms his own faith. Jesus in his reply ignores the reaffirmation and adds the assessment that "one of you is a devil (=adversary)" without naming the intended reference to "Judas ... who was later to betray him." Readers who know the wider story also know that Peter's reply proves thin and even desperate, given his future actions of denial. Those who heard Jesus speak might even have remembered Jesus' words to Peter in the Mark text cited above (8:33) where he calls Peter "Satan," a word equivalent to "devil" in the present text.

Clearly, the cross event, looming on the horizon in Jesus' immediate future, becomes in itself "a hard saying" that becomes "a hard decision" for men like Peter and Judas, and indeed for the rest of the "Twelve." They are all moral agents, immersed in three years of relationship with Jesus, soon facing the scandal of the cross and the

threat it posed to both Jesus and themselves. In the gospel narratives read during Lent, these two men grow large in the consciousness of the Christian community that long afterward ponder the risks they face because they have chosen to cast their lot with the crucified One. *Peter* and *Judas* are distinct character types which reveal what it means to follow Jesus and to take up their cross. They prove to be similar and yet distinct persons who face the prospect of self-sacrifice, following different roads, driven by opposing loves, and arriving at dissimilar destinations. Both men are formed in the environment of the earthly Jesus and yet embrace agendas so utterly diverse that we are conflicted in rendering a final verdict on their outcomes. In the early church, the gospel writers provide rich content for serious conversations among Christians who face their own futures fraught with stumbling blocks no less crucial for spiritual survival. If following Jesus means “taking up your cross,” then each generation of Christians may discover in their midst the character types described by *Judas* and *Peter*. They must also examine their hearts and wonder, “Is this I?”

Our study intends to explore these two moral agents for whom the cross is the *CrossRoad*.

Scripture Readings (cited throughout)

Judas (Iscariot): Betrayal and Remorse

² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and *Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him*. ⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out ... (Matthew 10:2-5; parallel, Mark 3:19; Luke 6:13-16).

He is named from the beginning of the synoptic tradition (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) as “Judas Iscariot,” and he is also identified as the one “who betrayed him.” Luke shades the meaning of this last phrase by saying “who became a traitor” (Greek: *hos egeneto prodotēs*). What Luke’s version does is add the suggestion that Judas’ act of betrayal was a progressive and developing feature of his character. If we include one additional judgment made by Jesus (cited earlier in our *Notes*) and found in John’s gospel, then there is little doubt that his “becoming a traitor” had moral roots that are plainly sinister: “One of you is a devil” (John 6:66).¹ Things were dark and devilish with Judas Iscariot *from the beginning*. That observation has raised all sorts of theological questions across the years, among them “Why did Jesus need to choose Judas Iscariot as one of the Twelve?” Implicit in the question is also the suspicion that the suicide of Judas seems tragic and unfair, given his role in setting up the circumstances for Jesus’ redemptive crucifixion. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries there appeared a non-orthodox document known as the *Gospel of Judas*, made popular in recent years by an English translation and commentary in 2006.

Fascination with the Gospel of Judas has been due largely to its apparent depiction of the man not as a betrayer, but as a hero. According to most readings, Judas emerges here as one chosen by Jesus Himself to set in motion the events that would lead to His passion and death. That is, Jesus actually wanted Judas to betray him to the Jewish authorities, so that by His death He would be liberated from His material body, in order to return to His place of origin in the realm of spirit. Recently an important paper has appeared (not yet for publication), authored by a respected scholar and student of Coptic texts, which demonstrates convincingly that this reading of the Gospel of Judas is based on erroneous translations and is essentially wrong.²

The New Testament, by contrast, presents a different view of Judas. A few texts provide perspective on his character and intentions. In addition, several theories suggest his relationship to the political milieu among Jewish radical groups with agendas opposed to Roman occupation and influence within Israelite society at the time of Jesus. Our study will consider these together.

¹ I’ve often wondered what Stephen Langton (13th century CE) and Robert Estienne (aka Stephanus) thought when they numbered this biblical reference with the index of 6:66 (think, 666). Perhaps only a coincidence? You be the judge.

² Fr. John Breck, “Judas Iscariot: Hero or Betrayer?” May 1, 2007. <https://oca.org/reflections/fr.-john-breck/judas-iscariot-hero-or-betrayer>

We begin with early views expressed by the gospel writers. At the outset we consider the scriptures listing Judas Iscariot among the Twelve disciples. His name in those lists follows the man called “Simon the Zealot” (Matthew 10:4 and parallels, see above). Some suggest that this placement is not arbitrary but rather indicates Judas’ association with that shadowy group known as Zealots. Among the several parties of Judaism, this group held fiercely anti-Roman sentiments and operated in sporadic attacks against soldiers, especially in the isolated valleys near Jericho in Judean territory. Their mercenary practices included carrying concealed daggers strapped beneath their cloaks, earning them the name “the Sicarii,” a Latin word meaning, “carriers of the dagger.” Since Judas is distinguished from another Judas belonging to the Twelve by the designation “Iscariot,” some scholars think that this Aramaic word cloaked the Latin word *Sicarii*. In Latin that would be *Iscariota*, in Greek *Iskariotes*, and in Hebrew *ishq'riyoth* "man of Kerioth," which referred to a town in Judea. Of the Twelve, this Judas is the solitary Judean, while the others were from Galilee. Comparing the description of Simon Zealotes (=the Zealot), Judas’ name *Iscariot* is less direct by being intentionally masked. On the surface, he passes himself off as simply “the man from Kerioth.” Simon by contrast no doubt had a known past which, presumably, he cast aside when accepting the call of Jesus to be a disciple.

Further speculation from the sparse data on Judas leads other to surmise that he acted as a double or triple agent, working as a spy for the Jerusalem temple authorities while mingling with the Zealots in his “other life.” His acceptance of Jesus’ call placed him in a further privileged place to uncover whether his new master had Roman sympathies or had connections with the Judean sect of the Essenes or acted on his own as a new party. Armed with this fortunate inside information, Judas brokered his services to the highest paying handlers in any one of these disparate groups. A useful text comes from John’s gospel:

³ Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it (John 12:3-6).

John uses the word *kleptēs* for thief in this instance and not the word we discussed last week *lestes* which meant “rebel, insurrectionist, brigand.” The context for John had to do with dishonesty with the common purse, handled by Judas in his role as treasurer for the Twelve. John implies that the character of Judas lacked integrity, not only in his misuse of funds but also in his willingness to betray Jesus. That said, we speculate what his plans were for the purloined cash since the radical movements like the Zealots often engaged in theft in order to subsidize their political activities.

Further material in the gospels help enhance the deeper spiritual deficits of Judas:

⁷⁰ Then Jesus replied, “Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? *Yet one of you is a devil!*” ⁷¹ (*He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.*) (John 6:70-71).

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, ² and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. ³ *Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve.* ⁴ And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. ⁵ They were delighted and agreed to give him money. ⁶ He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present (Luke 22:1-6; Mark 14:10; Matthew 16:14).

The evening meal was being served, and *the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus* (John 13:2).

The consistent labeling of Judas as “a devil” and as one into whom “the Devil” entered requires elaboration. The word “devil” used in these case is from the Greek *diabolos*, a word meaning “slanderer, adversary” and is equivalent to the Hebrew concept of *ha-satan* or Satan which means the same thing. It’s hard to avoid the conclusion that Judas surrendered his heart to the designs of the Dark One, the “prince of darkness.” In John’s account of the Last Supper is preserved the most detailed conversation about the coming betrayal of Jesus:

²¹ After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me.” ²² His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. ²³ One of them, the disciple

whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. ²⁴ Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." ²⁵ Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. ²⁷ As soon as Judas took the bread, *Satan entered into him*. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, ²⁸ but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. ²⁹ Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. ³⁰ As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night (John 13:21-30).

Consistent with John's writing style, he ends this exchange with the plain assertion "Satan entered into him" and then closes the scene with the ominous words which carry deeper meaning, "And it was *night*."

Later, on the occasion of his arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus protests to the officers who come for him:

⁵³ Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour-- when *darkness reigns*." ⁵⁴ Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest (Luke 22:53-54).

Given the fact that Judas facilitates the arrest, the language "darkness reigns" agrees perfectly with the environment where the betrayer operates, namely, "night." Collecting all of these relevant texts together forms a distinct profile of Judas' moral and spiritual character. He is a man who joins the company of the Twelve at Jesus' invitation, having before committed himself to a subversive way of life where his external loyalties were entirely self-serving. His act of betrayal grows out of his character formation that thrives in the skilled art of pure deception. He is a devil, an adversary, to all men but himself, using others to fulfill his own agenda.

That conclusion finds specific confirmation in the later assessment, made by Peter after Jesus ascends to heaven. Luke, in the book of Acts, records that assessment along with the scriptural foundation from the Old Testament:

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) ¹⁶ and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus-- ¹⁷ he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." ¹⁸ (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. ¹⁹ Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) ²⁰ "For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, "'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' [Psalm 69:25] and, "'May another take his place of leadership' [Psalm 109:8]... which Judas left to go where he belongs." (Acts 1:15-20, 25b).

Peter is led to fill the vacancy in the apostolate so that the Twelve may retain that identity for their coming ministry. However, his comments about Judas reveal the perceptions we have already collected. Judas is, says Peter, a man of "wickedness" whose blood-money ends up paying for his burial in shame after dying a violent death by suicide. What happened to Judas by his own hand is judgment for his betrayal. Moreover, Peter remarks that through his death, Judas leaves his place "to go where he belongs," a not too subtle way of describing his eternal destiny. It is helpful to compare that judgment to words from Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17:

While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except *the one doomed to destruction* so that Scripture would be fulfilled (John 17:12).

"The one doomed to destruction" comes from the Greek *ho huios tēs apōleias*, "the son of destruction." Paul uses the same idea in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 to refer to the Antichrist.

Perhaps the most disputatious aspect of Judas among the readers of these passages has to do with responsibility and thus culpability for his actions taken against Jesus through betrayal. Did not Jesus predict the coming actions of this man? Was not the choice of Judas to be one of the Twelve the decision of Jesus, knowing what would result? Were not Jesus' words at the Last Supper directed to Judas in the symbolic and secretive gesture of dipping bread in the sauce with him, namely, "What you do, do quickly"? Does not the scripture become an argument for Judas' role in the betrayal, especially when quoted by Peter and alluded to by Jesus in his prayer "so that Scripture might be fulfilled"? See our comments above for each of these rhetorical questions. Read one way, all of this sounds like a dreadful fatalism where the deck is stacked against Judas whose actions are nothing more than the pitiful vagaries of history. Read as the providential foreknowledge of God, all of this seems to treat Judas as the willful pawn in a plot to recruit Judas and then set him up to take the fall through his

betrayal of Jesus — a betrayal that was part of the salvation plan that sent Jesus to the cross. Is this a case of evil being done so that good may result?

Those objections lie on the table of the biblical accounts and weigh on the minds of honest readers. However, they are not new in the history of God's dealings with His people. I offer an example from the Old Testament book of *Habakkuk*. In this prophetic literature the writer complains to God about the evil that was so widespread among his people in Judah, and that God has not intervened to end it. When God finally replies to the complaint, he tells the prophet Habakkuk his plans:

⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own (Habakkuk 1:6).

He continues to describe how this foreign nation will bring judgment on Judah for its sins to remedy the issues raised by the prophet's complaint. But in response, Habakkuk is horrified. He is horrified because God plans to use a nation that is more wicked than Judah to judge Judah:

¹³ Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (Habakkuk 1:13).

We might observe that given the prophet's objection, God can't win! If God does nothing, He is in the dock. If God uses the Babylonians to judge Judah, He is also in the dock. The question of justice, rightly executed by God on sin, seems to be stalemated.

The truth will not be defeated, however, nor will God's justice. In the remaining chapters of the prophet's book, God assures Habakkuk that He will finally judge the invading nation of Babylon for its sins also, so that in the end divine justice balances the scales. The evil Babylonians are still evil, and their violent acts in warfare will not go unpunished. They do the will of God by disciplining His people, all the while thinking that they are satisfying their own agenda for world conquest. The will of evil men always stands under the sovereign rule of Yahweh the King of the World and of Judah. It's all about sovereignty, that God rules over all, that God will have the last word, and that justice will be done. God ultimately releases Judah from captivity in Babylon by judging Babylon through the ascent of the Persians who deal with Judah generously, arranging their return to the land of Israel.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, also presents an argument that upholds the purposes of God even when evil men are the agents:

¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Romans 9:16-17).

Applied by us to the case of Judas Iscariot, we might say that Judas acted out of his will and for his own agenda. From that determination, Judas would not turn, would not surrender, and would not choose the way of righteousness. His heart was already compromised by sins that he agreed to obey. He is much like Pharaoh in Paul's argument. What Jesus does and what God directs is to choose Judas, one of the Twelve, knowing that nothing will deter Judas from his self-chosen agenda. Judas does what Judas wants to do, "come hell or high water." Bent on operating within the political maze of the first century, Judas intends to achieve certain ends, certain outcomes. But his self-will is his supreme vulnerability to the suggestions of the Devil who sees an opening in Judas to oppose the plans of Jesus. Having failed to defeat Jesus in the wilderness three years before, Satan intends to collude with Judas whose heart is hardened already. However, Jesus knows the higher purpose and the greater ends of his Father which climax in the cross. Refusing to "turn" Judas through coercion and the denial of his free will, Jesus re-directs the selfish aims of Judas (aims which which remain selfish and wicked) to the higher aims of salvation through the cross. For Judas, betrayal meant the end of Jesus and nothing more. For Satan, entering into Judas meant the end of Jesus and his own ascent against God. For Jesus and the Father, the greater good came through crucifixion.

The sovereign Lord is able to gather together the lesser ends of evil persons, defeat those ends, and fulfill His own ends. Again, there are these insights from Paul's argument:

¹⁸ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. ¹⁹ One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? ²² What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction? ²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory-- ²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:18-24).

We do not deny the tragedy of the man called Judas Iscariot, nor do we rejoice in his outcome when he comes to his awful end because of his hard heart filled with wickedness. Of course we would have wished better things for Judas, a man made in the image of God like us. Yet, even in his misuse of free will to achieve his own ends, God is not limited in what He is able to do through the life of Judas Iscariot. God "bore with great patience" this "object of his wrath, prepared for destruction." God redeemed the actions of Judas even when Judas refused to be redeemed himself. God redeemed his actions by repurposing them to new and life-giving ends, and so what Judas meant for evil (betrayal and crucifixion), God meant for good (crucifixion and salvation). In that assessment we can appeal to the case of Joseph in the Old Testament whom his brothers sold into slavery in Egypt, but who subsequently rose to prominence as the official who arranged food during a famine and supplied food to his own family:

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives (Genesis 50:19-20).

And so Paul, in his final words, acknowledges the supreme wisdom of God:

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ³⁴ "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

Judas did not end well; of that the texts speak plainly. Matthew's account of his end contains an episode where Judas Iscariot expresses deep emotion, but the nature of that sentiment is muted by the language for assessing his frame of mind and heart:

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. ² They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. ³ When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." ⁵ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself (Matthew 27:1-5).

Of special interest to interpreters is the series of reactions shown by Judas, beginning with the statement, "When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned..." If we assess the tone of that dependent clause, suspicion about what Judas expected at the trial comes to the forefront. It's as if Judas expected a verdict other than condemnation, and was taken by surprise. Or, denying that, we wonder if Judas failed to anticipate beforehand how he would feel about a verdict of death. After all, his heart was hardened by allowing the entrance of the devil into an already wicked soul. The text does not say that after the betrayal the devil left him to fend for himself. That possibility exists, of course, although not developed in the text. What Matthew does say about the state of mind of Judas is that "he was seized with remorse..." Only a single verb appears in the Greek text, *metamelomai*, "to feel repentance, to rue, to regret." This is equivalent to "feeling sorry, feeling sad" about what a person has done. Yet, Matthew does not use the verb *metanoceo*, the common word for "repent, change one's mind." The difference between the two verbs is a real distinction, a genuine difference. Judas acts on the *feeling of regret* by ridding himself of the "reward" for his betrayal by dumping the thirty silver coins at the feet of those who hired him.

To that action he adds words: "I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood." Ironically, he admits to his sin in the presence of those whose job it is to restore sinners; they are priests, after all! But they excuse themselves from further involvement, placing the duty for making things right back on Judas in the most venomous way. In one sense the priests are right: it is his responsibility; but what will he do now? Is his regret

deep enough, morally shaped enough, and spiritually penitential enough to become true repentance? Our response to the question lies in what we believe about suicide under these circumstances. Is suicide a moral act capable of making things right for Judas? Or is suicide in this case the human extremity of a man who is unable to come to terms with his “regret”? We can imagine other outcomes, other forms of recovery. Had the community of the Temple led by the priests been without guilt, without blood on their own hands, perhaps there among the holy men of Israel things might be made whole for Judas. But the sins of the priests in their complicity contributed to the occasion for Judas’ betrayal, and so they are of no help to him. The community of disciples around Jesus where he once found his “share” is also unavailable for they have fled, their leader, the man Peter, having committed his own offense against the Lord through denial in the courtyard of judgment on Jesus. The case of Judas is complex and in some ways ambiguous. As noted in our comments above, the later judgment of the church through the words of Peter is hard to evaluate since they are post-suicide.

In the end we leave the judgment about Judas in the hands of God. And yet the outcome of Judas came at the end of a long crooked path, mapped by a man whose own plans persistently resisted the way of the cross. Judas trapped himself inside a hard heart so that at the end the most he could manage was the pain of regret without repentance. His story is told by the gospels for the instruction of the church. They would face across the ages temptations to betrayal also, and about these Jesus gave complete warnings in his public ministry:

²¹ "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²² All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved (Matthew 10:21-22; Mark 13:12).

At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other (Matthew 24:10; Luke 21:16). At this considerable distance from the drama of Judas Iscariot, we cannot help him now. As part of the church, however, we are able to learn the road to betrayal and avoid the tragic end of Judas, and with God’s help, save ourselves.

Simon Peter: Denial and Repentance

From the earliest days of the gospel narrative, our impressions of Simon Peter form through actions and dialog that bring him into close relationship with Jesus. We see him as the man who wove hard-headedness with a deep devotion to the Lord. He did not hesitate to challenge Jesus or to make declarations of loyalty to the cause Jesus championed. Peter often spoke or acted before he thought carefully or weighed consequences. A few snippets from the gospel accounts illustrate the character of the man.

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him (Mark 1:16-18).

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter) (John 1:40-42).

In response to Jesus’ call, Peter and the other disciples offer immediate response along with the sacrifice of their vocations. Our first encounter with Peter identifies him with his given name, “Simon.” In John’s version of Peter’s call, Jesus predicts the name change to “Cephas” or “Peter” in Greek. Name changes of this kind have deep precedent in the covenant history of Israel, starting with Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob. Parallel to name change was character change, formed by Yahweh through His renewed covenant relationship with the persons.

In the case of Simon-become-Peter, Matthew expands the early conversation found in John with a later encounter:

¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:15-19).

Simon renamed as Peter comes under the covenant “blessing” of Jesus who affirms the Father’s grant of revelation of Jesus as Christ (or Messiah). With this blessing there also follows a new destiny belonging to the future of the community called the church. Peter will become part of ongoing arrival of the “kingdom of heaven” where the purposes of heaven will be unleashed on earth, and Peter will lead his fellow disciples, the apostles, in implementing those purposes in the future. From such texts we discover that Simon Peter would be formed like a “rock” (the meaning of his name) and lend this divinely given character to the emergence and mission of the church. When the names of the Twelve appear in Matthew’s list, Simon Peter is listed first, commensurate with his new-found role.

These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter) (Mark 3:16).

However, the optimism exuded from these favorable texts awaits future fulfillment for Peter, for his interim life with Jesus and his fellow disciples requires the hard work of costly discipleship under the tutelage of Jesus. The examples found in the gospels disclose failure alongside success, the exacting crucible of being a follower of the One who will face crucifixion. A few instances illustrate the process of Simon becoming Peter through “long obedience in the same direction.”³ In many instances the gospel writers continue to use the name “Simon” as a reminder that he is man whose life is a divine work in process. He is Simon on the road to becoming Peter through spiritual formation. In the following case study, Luke begins by calling him “Simon” during the scene where his faith is being tested, but then shifts the name to “Simon Peter” when he sees himself in a new light.

³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." ⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him (Luke 5:3-11).

The name shift happens in 5:8 after Simon Peter witnesses the overwhelming catch of fish after doubting they would find any after a long night’s effort. He sets the stage for the new discovery in 5:5 with the words “But because you say so, I will let down the nets,” and then goes on to confess, “Go away from me, Lord; I am sinful man” (5:8). Peter and his companions show astonishment with the results, and Jesus confirms their progress in the faith by saying, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.” Simon is becoming the rock and together with his companions they are becoming the church through slow and plodding steps.

Hard on the heels of this incident, Peter once more faces the difficult work of forming a character worthy of his calling by Jesus — a calling that leads to the cross.

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Matthew 16:21-24).

The backward shadows of the cross touch the lips of Jesus as he explains his coming death, but Peter will hear none of it. In a private aside, he rebukes Jesus — strong language for a master-disciple relationship — and proceeds to secure Jesus against harm (16:22). Equally terse are the words of Jesus who sees the hand of the Evil One, Satan (“the adversary”) pressing hard on Peter’s heart. The challenge of Simon-becoming-Peter lies within the *CrossRoad* between “the things of God” and. “the things of men”; between the self and the cross. Like the other disciples, Peter must pass through the fiery river of the cross where the things of men are burned up and the things of God become the supreme love of the heart.

³ A wonderful description by Eugene Peterson in the book of the same name.

In a similar passage, Jesus forewarns Simon Peter that the road ahead is indeed the *CrossRoad* and the Adversary will persist in resisting the formation of Peter's character:

³¹ "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." ³³ But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." ³⁴ Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:31-34).

This is a critical text, for in it converge the assault of Satan, the faith of Simon, his denial of Jesus, his need to turn back, and his role of strengthening the other disciples. That is a thick list of moral demands for Peter to fulfill, and he will not be able to walk this road — the *CrossRoad* — under his own power. Knowing this, Jesus resolves to “pray” for him. Ahead of Simon Peter, along the road, he will meet the crisis of faith and the crucial place of the cross. Peter's denial will not be his doom; Satan will not succeed in his dominion. Simon Peter lives under the promise of the Jesus who will “lead him all the way.” It is important that Peter is “ready to go with [Jesus] to prison and death,” but he needs the prayer of Jesus to make it so.

On the occasion of the Last Supper, when the heaviness of the moment falls all around Peter and his companions, Jesus washes their feet in demonstration that “having loved his own, he loved them fully” (John 13:1). However, Peter's strong will once more challenges Jesus:

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." ⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" ¹⁰ Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. (John 13:6-10).

John's gospel highlights the distinction between Peter and Judas Iscariot in this exchange, particularly when Jesus declares Twelve to be clean, but then adds “though not every one of you.” The writer clarifies the meaning of the saying by identifying, without using his proper name, Judas “who was going to betray him” (13:11). Even though Peter wants to specify the manner of his own cleansing, yet he thereby shows the seriousness of what Jesus is doing for the disciples, and he freely invites the washing by Jesus. What Peter learned that night was that Jesus must determine the terms of the cleansing, and Peter must surrender to those terms.

However, the resistance to Jesus remains, and Peter must yet come to terms with living as the disciple of Jesus who takes the way of the cross and not his own way. Yet again in John's account:

³⁶ Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times! (John 13:36-38).

The journey Jesus takes, he must take alone on the solitary road up to the cross. What Peter and the others must recognize is that their time is yet future, but their time will come. “I will lay down my life for you” is Peter's well-meaning act of devotion to Jesus, but Jesus makes clear that he will be unable to fulfill that devotion until the crucifixion happens and Peter has denied Jesus. Those are hard words to hear because they reveal the inadequacy of the human self to keep promises to Jesus until Jesus has kept his promise to give his life for them. No one can give his life for Jesus until the cross has happened, has done its work of redemption, and has penetrated the hearts of those like Simon Peter. It is here, of course, that we see the difference between Judas and Peter. Whereas Peter was willing to remain engaged with Jesus, even when the truth of the cross was inconvenient and deadly, Judas had foreclosed on that engagement, having already chosen his own agenda and set the course for his own outcome. Better for Simon Peter to argue with Jesus, for in his resistance, Peter showed that he cared and that what happens to Jesus truly mattered. Worse for Judas to remain silent, for in his silence Judas operated in the shadowy world of intrigue and betrayal, only to discover at the very end that what happened to Jesus by his hand brought remorse and suicide.

In the darkness after the Passover meal, Jesus and the Eleven (Judas had left to complete his intrigue against Jesus) arrived in the Garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus prays while Simon Peter and the other disciples sleep.

³⁷ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?" ³⁸ Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Mark 14:37-38).

Jesus spoke to disciples whose spirits were willing. Peter was willing also. Yet for each of them "temptation" was a present danger and required, not sleep for the body, but diligence and prayer for the spirit. Becoming devoted followers of Jesus would not end with the momentous events which ensued, but would be the work of their lifetime.

Judas, on the other hand, was not willing, for now he brings the temple authorities to the place to identify Jesus to be arrested for trial. Once more Peter, roused from his sleep no doubt, heroically tries to seize the moment and secure Jesus, still not persuaded that Jesus' purposes ought to be fulfilled.

⁴ Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" ⁵ "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) ⁶ When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. ⁷ Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." ⁸ "I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." ⁹ This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me." ¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) ¹¹ Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" ¹² Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him ¹³ and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year (John 18:4-13).

Matthew's account offers additional descriptions of Peter's vain attempt to protect Jesus, but leaves his name out of the narrative:

⁵² "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" (Matthew 26:52-54; compare Mark 14:47-50; Luke 22:49-53).

What happens to the disciples at this point in the shared narrative of two gospels is undisputed: "They fled..." and fulfilling the words of Jesus which he earlier quoted from the Old Testament:

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27).

Then all the disciples deserted him and fled (Matthew 26:56).

Then everyone deserted him and fled (Mark 14:50).

Peter is given a special note when the disciples abandon Jesus in Gethsemane:

Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. *Peter followed at a distance* (Luke 22:54; Mark 14:54; Matthew 26:58).

John's version is a bit more expanded, mentioning the presence of a second man, who remains unnamed. Peter "waits *outside the door*" of the high priest's official residence until the unnamed man arranges for Peter's admittance.

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, ¹⁶ but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in (John 18:15-16).

What these texts describe is the theme of Simon Peter's *distance* from Jesus during the course of his inquisition. Peter hangs around the edges of the proceedings, and although the special privilege is accorded him, he nonetheless does not involve himself. The gospel writers say nothing about the situation with the other disciples during this time, since they have gone into hiding, having been granted leave earlier by Jesus' request:

"I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go." ⁹ This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me" (John 18:8-9; compare 17:12).

And so, Peter is largely alone, given opportunity to brood over his sense of helplessness to do anything more for Jesus. He no doubt remembered Jesus' repeated pleas not to interfere with the completion of his mission in going to the cross.

All of which sets up the drama for the final act of the pre-crucifixion narrative. We present that incident in parallel columns to reflect the emphasis of each gospel in telling it.

Mark 14:54, 66-72	Matthew 26:69-75	Luke 22:55-62	John 18:15-18, 25-27
<p>⁵⁴ Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.</p> <p>⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. ⁶⁸ But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said,</p> <p>and went out into the entryway. ⁶⁹ When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." ⁷⁰ Again he denied it.</p> <p>After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." ⁷¹ He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."</p> <p>⁷² Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.</p>	<p>⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard,</p> <p>and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.</p> <p>⁷¹ Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"</p> <p>⁷³ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." ⁷⁴ Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!"</p> <p>Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.</p>	<p>⁵⁵ But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them.</p> <p>⁵⁶ A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." ⁵⁷ But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.</p> <p>⁵⁸ A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied.</p> <p>⁵⁹ About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean." ⁶⁰ Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!"</p> <p>Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly.</p>	<p>¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, ¹⁶ but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in.</p> <p>¹⁷ "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." ¹⁸ It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.</p> <p>²⁵ As Simon Peter stood warming himself, he was asked, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it, saying, "I am not."</p> <p>²⁶ One of the high priest's servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, "Didn't I see you with him in the olive grove?" ²⁷ Again Peter denied it,</p> <p>and at that moment a rooster began to crow.</p>

Whatever we might assume about the condition of Peter's heart during this scene, given his repeated denials of any prior acquaintance with Jesus, one thing is certain: Peter *remained* in the place where the first trial took place. If we take into account John's version, Peter accepted the privilege to go inside. The time spent in the courtyard and in the chambers situates Peter with other people who show interest in him, based on the suspicion that he belonged to the Jesus community. He has opportunity to bear witness. His denial of any connection to the man on trial inside is itself a trial of Peter's faith. And yet the fact of the cross lies ahead of Peter, as does the indispensable grace which the cross brings. Living with the horror of the events behind him, Simon Peter is caught in the middle of the *CrossRoad*: "the cross before me, the world behind me." He is caught because the road he travels now has narrowed — it is the narrow road that, ironically, will one day soon lead to life.

Although he broods *at a distance*, he is closer to Jesus than he may imagine, or, better, Jesus is closer to him. John's account places him inside the chambers due to the special privilege. And yet it is Luke who includes the only reference to Jesus and Peter together at the very moment of his final denial:

Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times."

⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly (Luke 22:60-62).

Luke does not tell us how the two came to be in proximity at that moment. John does. What we sense is that a divine appointment brought Peter and Jesus face to face so that Peter might remember the prediction of his three-fold denial of Jesus. "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered ..." (22:61).

That Jesus looked at Peter is good news, although in the moment all that Peter can know are bitter tears without excuse or protest.

There is a future for Peter because, unlike Judas, he does not commit suicide. Peter may be filled with the same remorse that Judas had but he allows his body to grieve, for after all, “the body is weak, but the spirit is willing” (Do you remember Gethsemane?). Soon, Peter will rejoin the rest of the disciples behind closed doors where the grief over loss stays locked in until the miracle of Jesus enters, and the possibility to begin again arrives. Simon-becoming-Peter remains on the *CrossRoad* where miracles can happen. The names “Simon” and “Peter” do not appear again in the text until Easter morning when Jesus lives again, after passing into death and then out the other side. There will also be “the other side” for Simon Peter, the man who denied his Lord, mourned over his failure, and chose life over self-inflicted death. One wonders what truth passed between Jesus and Peter when “the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.” Perhaps Peter heard unspoken words from the One he denied: “You and I will meet again — soon. Simon, we have business to finish on the other side. Don’t be late. I won’t.”

Since Lent restrains our eagerness to move from the cross to the empty tomb, this study will not reach the end of the story — yet. But (spoiler alert!) Jesus gets his meeting with Peter around another fire, only this time it’s in the morning when fishermen gather their nets and make an accounting of their catch on shore. They have breakfast together in the fellowship of the other disciples. And they talk about what just happened. Jesus is not finished with Peter, denial or not. Mending nets is not half as hard as mending bridges, and that’s how the story continues, and when the two are finished, there’s less of Simon and more of Peter; less of Peter and more of Jesus.

Conclusion

Long after the tumultuous events of Holy Week, when the work of the cross and the wonder of the resurrection have imprinted their eternal mark on history, an aging Peter sits with his quill and parchment to instruct the scattered children of God. It will be his second and final letter, and in it he will take stock of how things have turned out. His message is the hopeful musing of a man seasoned by the *CrossRoad*, wiser than the Simon Peter who heard the rooster crow the third time and then wept bitterly. He is wiser because he made room in his heart for Jesus to form him through the crucible of failure and denial.

Listen to some of his parting words:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Ah, patience; it is the virtue which sustains *us*. And yet in Peter’s rendering it is also the virtue of the *Lord*: “*He is patient with you.*” Who knew that better than the man who persisted in his anxiety about Jesus and the cross? Who knew better than Simon sifted by the adversary through the long journey and through the dark hours around the campfire in the courtyard and the chambers of Jesus on trial? We know that Jesus wanted both Judas and Peter “to come to repentance,” but we also know that only Peter would keep the doors open for that to happen. Jesus redeemed the actions of Judas, but not hardened and remorseful Judas. In the case of Simon Peter, who made room for Jesus by staying alive, he redeemed both.

Some sins have monumental consequences, but all sins begin in the heart. From the heart, the life is shaped and the steps are ordered. From the heart faith springs up, nurtured by the grace of God that goes before. If the lessons of Judas and Peter have lasting meaning, then surely it is this: keep your heart open and chose life over death. Allow the miracle of grace to break the hardness within so that God’s future may remain open to you. Life need not cave to the failures you meet, or to the decisions you botch. There is a purpose higher than your agendas, no matter how perfect they seem. No campfires of denial can defeat the Jesus who turns your way and looks straight into your face. Follow him to the cross; he will meet you on the shore where forgiveness awaits. He does not want you to perish. He wants your Simon to become his Peter.

Glory to God! Amen.