

In The Shadow of the Cross – Acts 2:29-41

When Jesus was calling men to follow him and become his disciples, he was at the front of the line. He was a fisherman, sure, but Jesus chose to use his boat as a pulpit from which he preached to the people. When Jesus demonstrated his authority over nature by allowing tired, frustrated fishermen to catch a boat load full of fish by simply listening to him, he was one of the fishermen.

Jesus healed his mother-in-law from a fever, and he watched in amazement as Jesus healed many of the people in his village and drove out their demons.

He was one of only three disciples who were permitted to go with Jesus into the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler, and there Jesus raised the dead daughter of Jairus back to life.

This was the disciple who challenged Jesus to call him out of the boat to walk on water. When Jesus does call him, the disciple manages a few steps on top of the waves before his eyes get off of Jesus and he sinks like a rock in the sea. Yet Jesus takes him by the hand and draws him up out of the water to safety.

Speaking of rocks, this disciple is given a new name by Jesus, a name which means, “Rock.” And Jesus promises to build his church on this rock, and the gates of Hell will not be able to overcome it. Jesus then takes this “Rock,” along with two other disciples, up to the mountain where the glory of Jesus is revealed to them. They saw that Jesus truly was God come in the flesh.

I am sure you know who I am talking about – the disciple we know as Peter, formerly called Simon.

Peter is quite the character. Welcomed into the inner circle of Jesus, he saw and experienced things many of the other disciples did not witness. Maybe that is why we were not too surprised that when Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” it was Peter who replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Peter is also known for some of the biggest blunders within the circle of the disciples. As noted, he did step out of the boat and started to walk on water at Jesus’ invitation, but he also started to sink when he saw the waves around him. When Jesus showed the disciples his glory there on the mountain, Peter pipes up and asks if they should build huts for Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

When Jesus speaks of his arrest and pending death, Peter is all bravado and says he will stay by Jesus no matter what. He even takes a swipe at someone with a sword when Jesus is arrested. He doesn’t hit a soldier, only a servant boy, and he slices off his ear – which Jesus has to fix.

And then there is the night of Jesus’ trial. Peter finds a way into the courtyard where Jesus is being held and tried, so he can be near, which is commendable. But when Peter is singled out

as a follower of Jesus – that same man who was now being tried before the Sanhedrin – Peter denied knowing Jesus, not once, but three times.

It is hard to forget this. Here as events were leading to the cross, Peter fails miserably. Though the cross was on the outskirts of town, quite a ways from where this all took place, I am sure Peter, as he reflected on that night, felt like he was under the shadow of the cross. In this sense, living in the shadow of the cross seemed like a terrible thing to Peter. He felt guilt and shame for what he did. The once proud, independent, “I’ll show you” follower of Jesus was humbled in the shadow of the cross. He saw himself for what he was, a vulnerable, weak, ordinary man. Nothing special. Nothing extraordinary. No super saint. Just a man who sometimes thought he was better than he was.

In the shadow of the cross, Peter was brought to his knees. There is no more bravado. The closest we get is when the women come running back from an empty tomb and declare that Jesus is not there. Peter makes a dash to the tomb to see for himself. How could this have happened? Wasn’t it bad enough that they had watched Jesus die? Now someone had stolen the body of the Lord...

That day Jesus showed himself to the disciples there in the upper room. Peter was there, and no doubt he was thrilled. It was almost unbelievable, but there Jesus stood, inviting them to touch him and even give him food. The shadow of the cross may not have seemed so heavy at that moment, but it was still there. While the other disciples were high-fiving each other and celebrating, Peter was quiet. He could not forget his denial of Jesus...

So when Peter takes the boys fishing after the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus shows up and has a heart to heart talk with Peter. Three times Jesus calls Peter to be a leader in the church, to be a pastor. Jesus says to Peter, “Feed my lambs,” “Take care of my sheep,” “Feed my sheep.” This is the work of a shepherd, and the Latin word for shepherd is “pastor”. Three times Jesus calls Peter to be a pastor, once for each time Peter denied him.

We read how Peter was there when Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the gift the Father promised them, and he was there when Jesus ascended into heaven. Peter was with the disciples in the days before Pentecost when the disciples waited on their knees, praying and seeking God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There, in the upper room as they waited, the disciples were still under the shadow of the cross. The promised Holy Spirit was for the people of God, those who put their faith in Jesus for salvation. The disciples were not being singled out to receive the Holy Spirit because they were better than other people, more pure or holy or righteous. Peter’s story alone is enough to remind us that these disciples were ordinary, sinful men like all other people.

But what prepared them for that great day of Pentecost, that great day when God, through the Holy Spirit, filled them with power and fire that would take them out of the upper room and out onto the streets with a message of salvation for all who would believe? It was the fact that

they were still in the shadow of the cross. This time it was not a shadow of shame and guilt, but the shadow of God's protection. As Jesus died on that cross he bore the sins of each of those disciples, yes, even Peter, even as he bore our sins. Jesus took on himself the weight, the penalty of our sin so that as we repented, and sought him for salvation, we could be set free from sin and walk in newness of life. We are not just declared guiltless, we are made new.

"If any man is in Christ he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come," we read in 1 Corinthians 5:17.

We are born again, a new person. That old life of sin has ceased. A new life is ours – in the shadow of the cross. It is because of what Christ did on the cross that we can be set free of sin and given eternal life in him. Salvation is a free gift to us from God, received by faith, but it cost God much. It cost him the cross. And those who would find God, those who want to have a relationship with God, those who would want to have their sins forgiven so that they may enter a sinless heaven and spend eternity with God there, they will have to live in the shadow of the cross all their days.

Peter came to understand that. In the shadow of the cross, Peter was humbled, and repentant. In the shadow of the cross, he found forgiveness and grace. In the shadow of the cross, he was prepared to receive the Holy Spirit.

And Peter knew that he would live always in the shadow of the cross.

That very long introduction takes us to the text we read today.

The context of our passage is the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has just been poured out on the disciples, and, filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples came out of their hiding to share the message of Jesus to the people gathered in Jerusalem for the feast. We read this passage and we get all excited about the power at work in the disciples because of the Holy Spirit. They are bold, and courageous and ready to tell the world about Jesus.

It would be easy at this point to go on to a doctrine that speaks just of the Holy Spirit and how all we need is the Holy Spirit. Though there is truth in the fact that we need the Holy Spirit if we are to be faithful to our calling as disciples of Jesus, there is another truth we must never forget: we need to stay in the shadow of the cross.

Peter stands up, and with a newfound courage, he starts to preach to the people of Jerusalem. He explains to them that prophecy was being fulfilled that day, for the prophet Joel foretold a day when the Spirit of God would be poured out on the people of God. That very day the prophecy was being fulfilled and "the sons and daughters were prophesying" – preaching – because, as the prophet said, "God poured out his Spirit on both men and women and they would prophesy" (2:17-18).

How exciting! God's promises for the future were being fulfilled. It was happening now! The age of the Spirit had begun, when all God's people – all Christians – would live through the power of the Spirit of God living within them.

But note, we still live in the shadow of the cross. We did not read verses 22-24 but the message is clear – without the cross there would be no Pentecost. Without the cross, without Jesus' death and resurrection, the Spirit could not have been poured out on God's people. We needed salvation, the cleansing of our lives from sin, before the Holy Spirit could abide within us.

Peter takes us to the cross again and again in this sermon. In verses 31-32 Peter speaks of Jesus death – which was on that cross – and of his resurrection. Jesus is alive, and he is the one who pours out the Holy Spirit on his followers. But it is the Jesus who was crucified (v. 36) who is made “both Lord and Messiah (Christ).” We see there the shadow of the cross once more...

When the people were moved by the Holy Spirit to conviction, and cried out, “What shall we do?” Peter responds, “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit...” You must go to the cross, to the place where we find salvation. There we find the justice of God displayed against all ungodliness, and His mercy, as he grants forgiveness to all who repent and put their faith in Jesus.

Though the book of Acts is the story of what God did in the early church as the Holy Spirit inspired them, we never leave the shadow of the cross. The Holy Spirit never points to himself, but always directs our gaze to Jesus, to the One crucified for our salvation.

There on Pentecost Sunday, as Peter declared to the people that the day foretold when God would pour out His Spirit on all people had come, he knew he still stood in the shadow of the cross, and he invited the people to also come under that shadow.

In the shadow of the cross is salvation. In the shadow of the cross there is grace. In the shadow of the cross we find Jesus, and he alone can save.

Joel Engle put these thoughts to song:

In the shadow of your cross I will live for all my days.
How could I forget the price you paid?
In the shelter of Your love I will give you all my praise
In the shadow of Your cross I will stay (by Joel Engle)

This morning Jesus invites you to come live in the shadow of the cross – to find salvation, and new life through faith in Him. Jesus invites you to come live in the shadow of the cross as we partake of Communion, to remember the price our Lord paid for your salvation – his broken body and shed blood. Jesus invites you to live in the shadow of the cross every day, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Will you, like Peter, live in the shadow of the cross?