

Psalm 27

- ¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
- ² When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.
- ³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
- ⁴ One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.
- ⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
- ⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.
- ⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
- ⁸ 'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'
Your face, LORD, do I seek.
- ⁹ Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

¹² Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles —

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Sermon

Last weekend John and I watched the new Netflix movie *The Two Popes*. You might have heard about it because it's a fairly big budget picture for Netflix, or maybe because Jonathan Pryce and Anthony Hopkins have been nominated by nearly every award so far in the categories of best actor and best supporting actor, respectively. It's great. To be abundantly clear, it's fiction. But it's great. The movie tells the, again, fictional story of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, and it imagines a world in which Pope Benedict understood his papacy, which was in fact mired in conflict over the abuse of children by priests and the subsequent coverup by the church, that he understands his papal power is waning. And in this, he befriends his theological opposite, Jorge Bergoglio, the Chilean Archbishop, encouraging him not to retire, but remain, knowing that he would be a beacon of change and hope as the new pope. The two strike up a sort of friendship, that while strained by the vast power differential and theological disagreements between the two, kindles a bond shared by the crucible of specific loneliness that is church leadership. The movie is really lovely—cleverly written and acted, and uses a shockingly accurate replica of the Sistine chapel for filming.

And it reminded me of Peter and Paul. Those venerable old leaders of the church, nigh on 2000 years back.

I promised you a week ago that we'd revisit Peter, and so here we are. By way of reminder, Peter came to be a disciple of Jesus through his brother, Andrew. And Peter's discipleship through the gospels, the book of Acts, and the letters purportedly written by him, was anything but straight forward. Peter occupies our imagination at both some of the highest heights of Jesus ministry—like when he was the disciple to see, really see, that Jesus was the messiah, the Son of God...or when he was one of the very first to see and believe in the resurrection at that Easter tomb—and also some of the absolute abysmally lowest lows of Jesus time—like when Jesus called Peter Satan, and told him to get away...or that time he denied Jesus three times on the very night of his trial, when he needed him the most.

This is, in part, why I love Peter so much. He's the most "shoot from the hip" and "leap before you look" disciple. Peter doesn't seem to think so much as do. And as someone who reacts from her gut more often than not, I appreciate this about him. I like having a sort of exemplar in ministry who both really, really gets it right sometimes, and other times falls utterly, awfully, disgracefully on his face at others. I'm positive that in real life Peter would be too much to handle, and I don't want him to be my pastor. But also, as a character, I dig him. And he gives me real hope.

Because Peter's story extends far beyond Jesus' story.

Peter, you see, didn't end when Jesus sat with him on that beach, eating fish, forgiving him for his betrayal. Or on Pentecost when he went out to preach the gospel in languages he previously couldn't speak.

Peter became one of the great fathers of the church, a founder of our fledgling tradition, the Bishop of Rome, the first Pope...although we have no proof Peter actually ever stepped foot in Rome, let alone saw himself in this role. But I digress.

Peter served as a teacher and a leader in Jerusalem and Antioch and maybe Corinth...although those last two are a little fuzzy. And while he didn't go around cutting off ears in his later church ministry, he was no less controversial. At one point, Peter and Paul, the two poles of the early church, really, really got into it. We don't have all the details, because their story is told in a single letter, of which we don't have the matching letter. It happened at Antioch, when Paul showed up with his teaching that Gentiles should be fully welcomed into the church, without conversion to Judaism. This was a super hot button issue for early Christians, and it had a lot of consequences...as any conversation about who is welcome and who is not welcome in the church has throughout history.

The earliest church, of course, was built up of Jewish people who believed Jesus was their Jewish messiah. So, they kept kosher and were circumcised and followed Jewish law. Then along came Paul, and Paul preached this message that said, yes, obviously, Jesus is first for the Jews, but Jesus is also for anyone and everyone who wants to join. And the law was impossible for all of us devout Jews to follow, so why would we ever hold these new gentile converts to such a high standard? Let them come to Jesus without becoming Jewish first.

Peter, when he came to Antioch, did just the opposite. He ate with the kosher Jews and seemed to be promoting a hardline conservative position for the church. My favorite is when Paul, in his letter recounting the incident said, "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong." What a bold statement. He was wrong, and I told him so, to his face!

These two leaders, at this point, didn't get along.

But what's fascinating is that it's through Peter, ultimately, that God chooses to make the most profound statement of welcome for the gentiles. Paul did the lion's share of work to include outsiders in the church, let us be abundantly clear about that. But Peter's the one who got the vision.

One night, Peter was asleep, and he has this crazy dream. A sheet comes down from heaven, and it's covered with all sorts of animals. Like birds and reptiles and cows and pigs and all sorts of four-footed creatures. And God says to Peter, eat! Eat up! And Peter's like...no way, God. There's unclean animals, that's not kosher. And God says, no, really, eat up! And Peter says, no, unclean! And finally God says again, eat! Peter! Eat! And Peter gets it. There's something about Peter and threes. He gets that God is sharing with him a vision of welcome for all people, all dietary types, kosher and non-kosher alike. Those who eat snakes, you're welcome! If you love bacon, you're in! If you only eat vegan, well, maybe there was a beet on the sheet too.

And, shockingly, Peter changes his mind. He comes to Paul's way of thinking and seeing, and ultimately welcomes the gentiles without a conversion.

And I love Peter for this change of heart, for being willing to admit where he might have been wrong, and to change his mind...which is never an easy thing to do, especially when we've publicly argued for the opposing idea. It can feel shameful to change our minds, but Peter does it anyway, and the church is ultimately better for it.

This is, in its own way, the message of the two popes. Part of what the fictional story imagines is that Benedict and the soon-to-be Pope Francis speak their confessions to one another, offering the absolution of the sacrament. I'd like to imagine that Peter and Paul might have had a moment like that, as well. Speaking quietly between themselves, coming to a point of mutual agreement and respect in the midst of difficult division and argument.

I like to imagine this, because I find that it's the hope of Peter for me, and for the church. Peter's all over the map. He's hot and cold, wise and incredibly stupid, he takes thoughtless risks and also enacts great moments of courage, he denies and is forgiven, he recants a hardline orthodoxy, and finally becomes a leader of a more generous and open church. As Christians, I think there's something here to relate with...if not the specifics, then at least the story line that each one of us has been in the wrong, has been hard headed or in denial, and sought a change of heart.

Peter is our reminder that a change of heart is always an option. And Paul tells us the story that we should be open and welcoming to the change of heart of others, even our fiercest foes. This is a compelling story, in the world of Peter and Paul and the world of Benedict and Francis and in our own families and congregations. The hope isn't ever in being right all the time...but that we will be welcomed back, and might even be made stronger, in seeking repentance and a change of heart for the missteps we've made along the way.