

Wisdom at the Gate
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
March 20, 2022

John 18:12-27

Let's look back at where we've been this Lent. We started off with the resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany, John's gorgeously crafted Easter foreshadowing story. Then last week, we had Jesus washing the feet of the disciples in the upper room, demonstrating what love in action really looks like. Today we have a mix of Jesus's pretrial and Peter's denial.

This will be followed by observing Jesus as he interacts with Pontius Pilate, a representative of the Roman Empire in his community. Then we're going to double back in time to the Palm Sunday protest that triggered his arrest before we head into Holy Week.

We're spending a lot more time this year than we usually do in the crisis that immediately precedes the resurrection mystery that's at the heart of our faith. We are lingering in these raw conversations because we want to learn from them.

And we want to learn from them because we know that our own lives are not without trial and tribulation.

The book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible wants to help guide us in our learning. A rabbi friend taught me in seminary that her community views Proverbs as a daily righteousness guide, framed as a conversation between a father and a son. But the foundational character of this very masculine learning is a woman at a gate.

Lady Wisdom (Proverbs says) cries aloud in the streets, raises her voice in the town squares, at the head of the busy streets she calls. At the entrance of the gates of the city she speaks out.

And what does Lady Wisdom have to say? She chastises anyone who turns away when they hear her voice. She warns that when distress, crisis, trauma comes into your life (because it always will), those who listen to her, and heed her call to love and act with justice and mercy will ultimately dwell in safety.

Enter through Lady Wisdom's gate today, and you will be protected tomorrow.

Today, it is Peter who seems desperate for some protection. When we first meet Peter, he's still named Simon. That was his birth name, Simon. And Simon is a brother of Andrew, and Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist (Jesus' cousin).

One day Andrew goes to his brother Simon and says *"John the Baptist, he's pointed us to the one who is the Messiah, to the anointed one."* And so Simon and Andrew go together to see and meet Jesus. And Jesus says *"you're Simon, but from now on you will be called Peter, you are the Rock, the Steady One"*.

And Peter and his brother remain with Jesus. Peter gets to be part of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. Later, when some followers seem ready to give up on Jesus and abandon him, it's Peter who says *"Oh, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We've come to see and to believe that you are the Holy One of God."*

So it's no surprise when Jesus offers to wash his feet that Peter says *"No, that's not the work of the Holy One of God, not to clean my feet. Instead, Jesus, let me lay down my life for you"*

And it almost looks like he's going to do it! Because later that night in the Garden when Jesus gets arrested, Peter pulls out his knife and maims a member of the arresting party, cuts off his ear.

Peter has been with Jesus from the very beginning. He accepted the name that Jesus gave him, he beheld wondrous acts of power and love. Peter confesses Jesus is the holy one, worth dying for.

But in the hours after Jesus is arrested, Peter denies knowing him. And the first time he does it, is to a woman at a gate.

So after his arrest, Jesus is taken to some kind of compound for his interrogation. At that compound, there's a wall and in the wall, there is a gate and at the gate there's a guard and that guard is a woman.

The guard says to Peter *"you are not also a disciple of him, are you?"*

There's always a challenge in the Bible, we simply don't know her intonation, we're not given a description of her tone of voice.

So she could have said it in disgust... *"You are not also a disciple of him. Are you?"*

Or maybe curiosity? *"You are not also a disciple of him. Are you?"*

I want to hear it as confirmation and encouragement. *"You are not also a disciple of him. Are you? Right, you are, right?"*

"I am not." Peter says.

In spite of everything that Peter has seen and said, everything he has felt, and everything he has done up until now, when confronted by this woman at a gate asking him this question, "Do you know Jesus?" Peter denies knowing him.

I was curious about whether or not it was customary for the time that women would be serving as guardians of the gate at the high priest's compound because it doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Historically, I couldn't find any evidence for this being a common practice.

We're not told anything else that would help us identify who this examiner is, other than she is a woman at a gate asking a question about learning, loyalty, and values.

Because when you ask someone *"Do you know Jesus?"* that's what you're asking them about, their learning, their loyalty and their values.

So I want to suggest that this guardwoman is Lady Wisdom who was in Proverbs, again, Lady Wisdom stands on this threshold between insight and ignorance, understanding and witlessness. Lady Wisdom, Emissary of the Divine, companion of God, embodiment of sacred teaching says to him, *are you not also a disciple?*

But she's not just asking, "Oh, do you know Jesus?" She's saying *"Have you learned, have you received his teachings for daily righteousness? Peter, Oh, Peter. Have you held the hand of Jesus? Peter, have you turned your face toward love? Peter, have you committed yourself to the work of God's justice? "*

No, it seems. Peter has not yet. That will take one more women at a gate.

Very few people stay by Jesus's side during his sham trial and his very real execution. All of the named male disciples in John's account abandon him. His mother Mary stays with him and so does Mary Magdalene. After Jesus is dead, and after he's buried, it's Mary Magdalene, who goes to tend to his tomb, she is the only one brave enough to go to this final resting place of someone who has been executed to make a political point. She is the one that opens Wisdom's Gate.

And when she gets there, the stone has been moved out of the way. Mary Magdalene is the first to learn that the tomb isn't a dead end, but is rather a gateway to impossible life. Because Mary not only learned the teachings of Jesus, and so treasured them while he was alive, that she recalled them in a moment when all seemed lost.

She is the first (and in John's account she is alone in this), she is the first to receive the wisdom beyond Jesus's death.

And so, she runs. She runs to Peter. She runs crying out like Lady Wisdom again: To be heard. And finally, Peter does. And Jesus must have too, sometime long before, John says... the Word was in the beginning, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

Other parts of the Bible put Lady Wisdom in the beginning as well.

When the high priests are trying to entrap Jesus, when they're trying to trick him his response is: *"I haven't hidden anything from you or from any human authority. You and your Roman overlords could have come to hear me preach along with the countless disenfranchised stateless people that you're supposed to be protecting. I have said nothing in secret. Go talk to them. Go talk to the multitudes who felt hope and shared their resources because of my witness to the ever loving God of covenant."*

Lady Wisdom can't protect Jesus from the death that follows... his unwillingness to compromise who he is and who he stands for, but she stands with him. She is with him in that uncompromising stance that still compels us to this day.

So we can be like Peter and we can deny Jesus when our faith feels awkward or embarrassing, or even dangerous. We can do that. But doing so isn't going to close the tomb back up. Denying him isn't going to help us avoid the gateways along our journey in life.

Because Lady Wisdom is still there. She's still there crying out to help protect us and guide us through our days. Not so much that we will be protected from strife or even from death, but to teach us how to safeguard the integrity of our souls.

So that when we are chastised, when we are judged for our work to care for the disenfranchised, the hungry, the disabled, the foreign born...

when we are chastised for those things... we will stand without shame, without fear and without doubt that we do all of those things in the service of the righteous God. Amen.