

Jesus Christ the Faithful Witness

John 18:1–27

Turn to John 18 please. I know that this is Palm Sunday, and traditionally we should celebrate the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But the Gospels give us so many important stories in Holy Week. Going from the triumphal entry this Sunday and the resurrection next Sunday doesn't seem right to me. So today we will look at John 18, what happens after the Last Supper on Thursday evening, after the Lord's teaching and his long prayer in front of the disciples.

This message is called "Jesus Christ, the Faithful Witness." That line comes from Revelation 1, and it's based on stories like we'll read today in John 18. All Four Gospels deliberately contrast Jesus being faithful under pressure and Peter denying and failing under pressure. The Peter story tells us what not to do, the Jesus story tells us what to do.

The different Gospels do this in different ways, but they all deliberately compare the disciples and Jesus, particularly Peter and Jesus. Jesus lived the whole last day of his life as our example. He is not just the Savior dying for our sins. He is that, but that's not all. He modeled how we should act when faithfulness is risky and dangerous.

In the New Testament, Jesus is never our example more than when he faced his enemies and his trial and suffering and death. The NT keeps going back to that to teach us how to live. We saw that in the marriage sermon a couple weeks ago. It comes up in many places.

1 Jesus Goes where Judas can Find him (18:1–3)

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it. Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. So Judas came to the garden, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and the Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons.

The sad thing here is that Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples, betrayed him and helped his enemies. But Judas is not in control of this situation, Jesus is. Jesus has already had a long evening with his disciples since the Last Supper, John 13 to 17. For all of that Jesus went where Judas would not know to look for him. Once that was done, then Jesus went to the place where he knew Judas and the arresting crowd could find him.

You need to imagine that 1st century unbelievers, the enemies of Christ at the time John wrote this, could twist the facts of the Lord's arrest and trial to make Jesus and his followers look very bad. It was true that Jesus was betrayed by one of his chosen 12. But it was not true that Jesus was fooled and trapped by this. He was not fooled, and he was not trapped. He knew what was coming, and he met it head on.

2 Jesus and the Crowd: Who's Afraid of Who? 18:4–9

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they said. Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.”

In Exodus 3, God told Moses his name: “I AM WHO I AM. Go tell the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.” The name “Yahweh” is almost exactly how you would say “I am” in Hebrew.

When Jesus says, “I am he” to the crowd, it’s the normal way to answer the crowd in Greek, but it also is how one would say “I AM” in Greek. If Jesus was going to give them the Greek version of God’s name, that’s what he would say, and John the writer wants us to understand that here.

Does Jesus try to avoid this crowd? No. Does he shrink back from them? No, he walks out to meet them. When he tells them he’s the one, they are the ones who shrink back and fall to the ground, not him. Again, Jesus meets this head on.

One of the things that the early enemies of Christians used against them was that the followers of Jesus all ran away. John does not talk about that. John gives us a different side to that story. Jesus did not want his followers to fight for him. He wanted them to go free. “If I’m the one you want, let these men go.” Which they did.

3 Simon Peter wants to Fight (18:10–11)

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.) Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?”

Luke tells the same story this way: *When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, “Lord, should we strike with our swords?” And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, “No more of this!” And he touched the man’s ear and healed him (Luke 22:49–51).*

In Luke and in John, the disciples were ready to fight for Jesus, and Jesus said, “Don’t. Don’t fight, the Father wants me to submit to this.”

Later in John 18, Jesus explains this to Pilate: *“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”*

Jesus was giving Pilate evidence that his kingdom was not a threat to Pilate's job. *"If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."* Jesus knew his disciples would fight if he wanted them to fight. Something incredibly unjust was happening, Jesus being arrested by people who wanted to kill him. But for the Lord's kingdom, not of this world, that was the wrong fight.

The disciples were ready to fight, and the Lord said "don't." Once he was arrested, they fled, but when the arresting crowd first showed up, they were ready to fight. In 2 Timothy, Paul writes, "I fought the good fight." The good fight means the right fight. Not everything that makes us want to fight is the right fight. It's not always easy to tell. Let's live so that when our life is done, we can say, "I fought the right fight."

The servant's name was Malchus. In the Gospels, passing characters like this are not usually named. When we have the name for such a minor role, there's a pretty good chance that the churches receiving this Gospel actually know Malchus. He's probably a believer they know.

4 Jesus Taken to Annas (18:12–14)

Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

In the Law of Moses, the high priest was high priest for life. Annas was supposed to be the high priest. But the Roman governor before Pilate got nervous about Annas, because the Jews respected him and would do whatever he said. That made the Romans nervous. So that governor said the Jews had to choose a new high priest every year.

So the Jews chose one of the sons of Annas, but informally Annas was still the real high priest, and over the years five of his sons were chosen for a year, and one of his grandsons, and here we learn of Caiaphas who was a son in law of Annas. So when the Gospels or Acts speak of the high priests, plural, they mean Annas and this collection of his offspring that took turns as high priest for the year. This year it was Caiaphas. Annas was the patriarch of the high priests.

That Caiaphas had already said that it would be better for one man to die, Jesus, than have the Romans attack the Jews for rebellion. The line meant more than Caiaphas knew, and that's why John repeats it. Jesus did die for his people, the shepherd laying down his life for his sheep.

5 Peter Denies the First Time (18:15–18)

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, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant

girl on duty there and brought Peter in. “You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?” she asked Peter. He replied, “I am not.” 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.

We assume the unnamed disciple to be the beloved disciple, who we assume to be John of Zebedee. Now the story gets unfortunate for Peter. He did not deny that Jesus was the Christ, but he denied that he was a disciple of Jesus. Jesus told the truth about himself, and Peter denied the truth about himself. And to a servant girl. In all the Gospels, a girl is behind Peter’s first denial.

In my high school years, I wanted to live in God’s ways, but I was very reluctant to be associated with Jesus. I was too much like Peter. Yuck. I wish I had not been like that.

Peter stands with the servants and officials, who are exactly the ones that arrested Jesus. He’s standing with the arresting crowd, warming his hands. That’s not wrong in itself, but it is quite a switch from taking a sword to one of them. And it makes faithfulness to Jesus a risky business.

6 Jesus Wants a Fair Trial (18:19–24)

Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. “I have spoken openly to the world,” Jesus replied. “I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.” When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” he demanded. “If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “witness as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?” Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

In the Law of Moses, a trial depended on witnesses. What a person said in their own defense did not matter. Their own words could incriminate them, that’s what Annas wants, but their own words could not defend them. There needed to be two or three witnesses, three was best, two was enough. When Jesus says, “Why question me? Ask those who heard me,” it might sound cheeky and disrespectful to us. But Jesus is only saying, “let’s do this the way Moses told us to do it.”

Jesus says he always taught in the synagogues or at the temple. Whenever possible, Jesus went to the traditional Jewish places of worship. In Luke 4 we read that it was the custom of Jesus to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. In his last week in Jerusalem, he taught openly in the temple every day. Jesus had a new message, but whenever possible he gave it in the traditional places. That’s why he knows they will have no trouble finding witnesses about his teaching.

Jesus was even clearer after he was slapped. Jesus spoke to the one who slapped him: “If I said something wrong, witness as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?” In other words, “Why aren’t we doing this the way Moses told us? Bring your witnesses.”

This paragraph ends with Annas sending Jesus bound to Caiaphas for the Jewish trial. John seems to know the other Gospels, and he writes things they did not cover. The other Gospels record the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. That's what happened when Annas sends Jesus bound to Caiaphas. What John has given us here is a more private meeting between Jesus and Annas, before Jesus was taken to the trial before the Jewish Council.

7 Peter Denies Being a Disciple Two More Times (18:25–27)

Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, “You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?” He denied it, saying, “I am not.” 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 garden?” Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

Peter is a hero of our faith. Jesus said that Peter means “stone,” and that he would build his church on that rock. The first half of Acts shows us Peter at his best, and Jesus did with Peter just what he said. But Peter also had some bad days, and our story today tells of Peter's worst day.

Understand where Peter failed. Peter did not deny that Jesus was the Christ. But Peter would not say, “I follow Jesus, I'm a disciple of Jesus.” That, my brothers and sisters, is of first importance to the Lord. That's what makes us a witness, a faithful witness. Once we've said that we follow him, then we can talk about why we follow, and who he is. But first we say, “I follow Jesus.”

Jesus in this story is our hero, our champion. Jesus did not cringe in the face of his enemies, and he told the truth about himself. Peter would not tell the truth about himself, but Jesus told the truth about himself. “You want Jesus of Nazareth? Here I am.”

He did not cringe or draw back in the face of his enemies. If we had only this Gospel, we might think Jesus did not dread what was coming. The other Gospels tell us about Jesus' Gethsemane prayers, and we know that he did dread what was coming. It's not courage if you're not scared.

At the trial before the Council that we have in the other Gospels, they said, “Tell us the truth: are you the Christ, the Son of God?” Jesus said, “I am.” That, my brothers and sisters, is why he's the faithful witness. And at that moment, his death was sealed. He's our model and example, and our champion. His enemies did what they wanted. They crucified him in his weakness. Then God did what he wanted. God raised him from the dead, with an indestructible life, and made him Lord of heaven and earth. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for the story of our Lord's faithfulness in this terrible time. Thank you for helping and strengthening him to walk this path. Do the same in us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.