***“The Sheep Will Be Scattered”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

**Matthew 26:31**

31 Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

**Luke 22:31–34, 54–62**

31 ‘Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, 32but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.’ 33And he said to him, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!’34Jesus said, ‘I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.”

. . . 54 Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house. . . 56Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, “This man also was with him.” 57But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.” 58A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!” . . . 60At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. 61The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” 62And he went out and wept bitterly.

It may be hard for us to put ourselves into Peter’s sandals. His master and teacher was working wonders and proclaiming truth, but then starts telling them that he will be arrested, condemned by the chief priests, and killed by the Gentiles, before rising again on the third day (Mark 10:33–34). Peter and the others have a hard time believing him, although he tells them repeatedly. Peter especially resists. He cannot accept that his powerful and wonderful teacher will be killed. Only now, on the night of the Last Supper, has Peter come around to believing the warning, but he acts brashly, claiming that he will go all the way with his master. But Jesus knows that he won’t, at least not *this* night. This is the night when the chief priests arrive, backed up by the temple guards and a mob. They arrest Jesus and take him away to be subjected to an illegal, night-time trial before the Sanhedrin.

Of course, by this time, Peter is no longer under any delusions about what the religious authorities will do to Jesus. His mind knows, but his heart is crushed by dread and heartache.

So when a servant girl says, “hey, you’re a follower of this Galilean prophet, aren’t you?” he instinctively denies it. He doesn’t want to be killed, and that’s a real danger. He blurts out something that will protect him. Now, he hasn’t thought this out; he’s not planning an escape. He is disoriented and obsessing about what is going to happen to Jesus. He’s not really thinking about himself, despite his instinctive self-protection. He knows he is in danger as long as he hangs around the high priest’s house, and yet he does. Then there’s the moment when Jesus looks Peter in the eye, and everything Jesus had said comes rushing back to Peter.

Talk about guilt and shame! Peter feels it, “bitterly.” I imagine there is pity and understanding in Jesus’ look, but that doesn’t help much. Peter knows he has not been brave. He has failed a hard test, and he is ashamed. I think Peter’s inner suffering will become an important part of his own story and testimony later on, when he recovers his courage. But first, Peter and the other disciples are like sheep who are scattered after their shepherd is struck down. They go indoors and commiserate with each other. They are crushed and deeply forlorn.

The Resurrection will come on the third day, and then, fifty days later, the day of Pentecost arrives. It is only *then* that their courage will revive. That is the day that the Spirit is poured out on them. Their hearts will swell with courage and the desire to preach the gospel. Peter will go forth and give passionate speeches proclaiming that the Messiah has come, that he was disgracefully treated, but that he rose from the dead. He lets them know “you rejected the Holy and Righteous One,” “but God raised him up” (Acts 3:14; 2:24). People should call “on the name of the Lord... Repent, and be baptized” (2:21, 38). There is no atonement teaching at this early stage, nothing about “Jesus dying for your sins,” as Paul would later say (1 Cor 15:3).

The key points of Peter’s proclamation are that God fully backed and vindicated Jesus, the Messiah; that Jesus was innocent; that he extends forgiveness and salvation despite the atrocity of the crucifixion; and that the gift of the Spirit is freely offered to all. It is only later, through the Apostle Paul, that we will hear a sacrificial interpretation of the death of Jesus. In the early apostolic preaching, it is not the *death* that saves anyone; it is Jesus *himself* who is saving. We are saved by a *person*, the Son of God, who reveals the Father to us. Of course, Peter and Paul will both proclaim this message.

Jesus empowered us to trust God, and to accept truth and goodness into our hearts. “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to *give* you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). God does not need to be persuaded or appeased. Salvation is God’s own gift. God forgives and accepts us, as the father accepted the repentant son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Sometimes it is hard for us to accept the unconditional kindness of God. But, *accept* it! Jesus accepted Peter back without penalty or scolding. He accepts us the same way. I’ve had to regain *my* courage a hundred times, I think. But Jesus is always ready for my return, with no penalty, no bawling out, no shaming. There is no shame in the kingdom.

So be not scattered; be not afraid, and be not ashamed. You know that God loves you, and that Jesus reveals God’s character. He also showed that there is a resurrection from the dead. We can believe this. This is one of the sources of our radiant hope. The afterlife is one of the ways in which Jesus receives us with joy. He receives you that way, right now, too. Accept the grace of God, which always takes you back, despite any mistakes you’ve made. You are saved by grace.