

Isaiah 63:7-8, Matthew 26:69-75
“Jesus, the conqueror of the world”

The Sunday after Christmas tends to be one of the lower Sundays of the year. In most churches it is the Sunday after Easter, but we combat that with Youth Sunday or Confirmation Sunday which tends to be a bigger Sunday for us. So thank you for coming out even in the midst of the ice and the cold for coming out to worship today. It has been an eventful Christmas season so far, we had nearly 400 people in worship over Christmas Eve, which was the most we have had since Covid, when we always topped 40 between the three services.

This Sunday is also a unique Sunday because it is the last Sunday for us in the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Righteousness. We started this sermon series in January of 2023 so this is three complete years that we have walked alongside our Savior as he taught us what it means to be righteous. We saw that it isn't enough just to believe in Jesus, even the demons believe and shudder, but to actually live lives of righteousness that is so hard to come by in Christians today.

Today we also turn the page on 2025, it is the last Sunday of the year and so it creates a natural tendency to think back over the past year and ask the question of how did we do in our faith in following our Savior Jesus? Like the life of our Savior we are able to at Christmas look at the birth of Jesus as the first chapter, but even as we close out Matthew we see the Lent in Advent, the passion and the resurrection of Jesus as the last chapter. In all of these chapters, in all of these transitions, we see Jesus as a conqueror, even conquering death in his resurrection, which allows us to conquer sin.

Our role is to obey and live in the victory that Jesus has won as conqueror. Matthew, more than any other Gospel, as we finish it out today, emphasizes the importance of discipleship as manifested in righteousness, and yet, he is not overly optimistic about human performance. We fail, we fall short, we deny and abandon. But praise be to God, praise be to the newborn king that even our failures are not enough to defeat the conqueror of the world, Jesus himself. Let's read.

READ

There is nothing more dramatic in all of Scripture than Peter's denial of Jesus. Judas kissing Jesus is pretty intense, but Peter's denial plays itself out in multiple stages and scenes which we were able to follow as Matthew depicts it. Peter cuts off the ear of the soldier, Jesus rebukes him and so he joins the disciples and flees from the scene while Jesus is taken out of the Garden of Gethsemane, marched back up the hill, back up the valley into Jerusalem, the big city,

and into the house of Caiaphas, the high priest where he is questioned, beaten, and eventually tortured and a crown of thorns placed upon him.

Peter follows the crowd into the house, but secretly. Three times he is outed, twice by two different servant girls and the last time by the crowd who identify him as someone who was with Jesus. And we see Peter, in order to save his skin he howls with the wolfpack. He curses Jesus, he does that which was very out of character for Jesus' followers and Jesus himself. This was all after in just the same chapter, in chapter 26:33 Peter says "though all become deserters...I will never desert you." He said this just a few hours earlier. He had chances to not deny Jesus. He started off in the courtyard, he denies Jesus, then he moves to the porch, he denies Jesus, then he denies Jesus to the crowd and goes outside crushed by his actions.

This was clearly the lowest time in Peter's life. This was worse than sinking in the Sea of Galilee for his little faith. This was worse than speaking out of turn in the transfiguration where he is scolded by God to listen to Jesus. This is worse than when he spoke out that Jesus would never suffer and die, and Jesus calls him to get behind him, and uses the word Satan to describe him or to describe what just took place.

Peter's denial of Jesus three times, with Jesus right there in the same house, has to be the lowest of Peter's life, a time when he had no hope on his own to get out of this mess that he had created. Which is why he goes away crushed, Scripture says he wept bitterly. Peter felt the need at that time, in order to protect his physical life, to disassociate himself from Jesus. He does it by cursing Jesus, which in this Scripture is a bit different from what we are used to. This means simply that he did something to try to prove to someone that Jesus has said all along that you don't have to prove. So he curses Jesus.

I'm betting that no one here in this room has ever heard me curse. I don't have anything against cursing, I mean, it isn't for me, but it also isn't like an indicator of something for me. I mean, I could curse if I wanted to, I know how to, I'm guessing I would be pretty good at it. I went to an inner city high school and played sports, so yeah, I know what it's like. I was in a fraternity in college where I was the only one who didn't drink, but I was involved with everyone in everything. It's not that I think I'm better, I'm not, I know that I'm not, but it doesn't come naturally, and I would like to think that it didn't come naturally to the disciples of Jesus either. So Peter felt the need to do something that was unnatural to prove to those around him that Jesus was no big thing in his life.

Do we ever find ourselves in that same place in life where we feel like we have to disassociate ourselves from Jesus so we act in a certain way in order to show those around us that Jesus is really no big thing for us? Maybe we feel embarrassed or out of our element because no one else seems to care too much about it, in fact may be acting in a way that is clearly contrary to what the Gospel and what Jesus would require of us? It is so easy to howl with the crowd when we feel like we have to save our own skin.

But what Matthew is doing here for us is contrasting Jesus' actions in the house of Caiaphas as he remains faithful to his mission, and Peter's action as he quickly and without hesitation denies Jesus. There is a clear contrast of Jesus' heroic fidelity seen in the previous verses and Peter's cowardice here. Peter serves as a model, though for sinners, as we see forgiveness and rehabilitation is possible for even the worst offenders and the worst sinners. Jesus example of fidelity and honesty is what we ought to pursue.

In our lives we can point to many times that we have fallen short. No one here is without sin, Paul in Romans tells us that, we have all fallen short of the glory of God. Our sin often creates within us a sense of unworthiness that cannot be overcome by anyone or anything at all. It creates a sense of permanent and irrevocable separation. But Peter's denial, the worst of the worst, is still not enough for God not to be able to conquer it and bring him back into the fold.

Peter do you love me? You know that I love you Lord. He is brought back into the fold even after he had denied Jesus. How can we not be encouraged by this truth that we find in Scripture that Jesus is our conqueror over all things, over all of our sin. The grace of God seen in Jesus overcomes all things and we have a history in our own lives to prove it. As we come to the end of 2025 are we able to identify and see how God has been faithful, even in the most painful times of our lives? Are we able to identify the faithfulness of God even in the face of our disobedience. Are we able to see how God has been more than a conqueror even as we live in a way that we try to disassociate ourselves from Him?

This is where the power of the Isaiah Scripture is seen. Isaiah tells us specifically what it looks like to believe in a God who is able to conquer all things. Listen to him again: "I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us. In his love and in his pity he redeemed us, he lifted us up and carried us all the days of old." When we find ourselves confronted with the desire to disassociate ourselves

from the Lord and deny him in our sin, we are told to remember God's faithfulness as he conquers all things on our behalf.

If we are going to talk about God as being the conqueror we need to be able to hear Paul's words in Romans 8:37: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, no angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, no powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Peter learns this, we need to learn this as well. When we say that Jesus is the conqueror of the world it means that he is our conqueror, we are the ones who benefit from his victory for life.

This is a story of the victory of divine grace over human sin. Christmas is this story of Jesus the conqueror of the world victorious even in his weakness. Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the Bread of the world, Jesus is the shepherd of the world, Jesus is the Savior of the world. Brothers and sisters, Jesus is the conqueror of the world. Amen.