

Sermon: The Worst Sound Ever
Text: John 18:1-27
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Context: WWPC
Lent Week Three
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Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

John 18:27

My parents started their married life on small farm in SW Minnesota. It was a typical family farm, stocked with the usual array of animals large and small: chickens and pigs and dairy cows. So I'm reasonably sure that very early every morning, their day started with the cockadoodle-do of a rooster crowing.

By the time I came along, they had long since left the farm behind, so that soul-jarring, sleep-disrupting sound was not part of my daily experience. Of course, like all of you, I have since heard it here and there, along the way.

But never like I heard it very early one particular morning. I can't remember exactly where I was when this happened, only that it occurred during the time when I was serving as a volunteer in Kenya.

As I've mentioned, I was serving with a Christian relief and development agency, and my job was to travel to remote towns and villages and write stories about the projects the agency was doing there, and profiles about the people served by them.

I was staying in a kind of guest house, right on the edge of a little town whose name I can't remember. And at about four in the morning -- well before sunrise -- the cacophony started up.

Cockodoodle-do!

Only this was not the sound of your average rooster crowing. This version sounded like it was coming through a loudspeaker.

There was no way I could go back to sleep. The noise was incessant and just plain loud. Eventually I got out of bed in the dim hope that I might be able to scare off this Thunder Rooster, to shoo it from its perch, which, given the volume, I judged to be approximately three inches outside my window.

I walked over to the window, pulled back the curtains and in the dim moonlight I saw that the problem was much bigger and much worse than I had imagined.

There was not one rooster sitting on the top rail of the fence that encircled the guest house. There were approximately 20 of them. All vying for the title of the world's loudest male chicken.

From a sleeping standpoint, I knew my night was over, well before the crack of dawn. I also suspected that this pattern was going to repeat for the remaining nights I was due to stay in that guest house.

At the time, the noise from all those roosters was the worst sound I had ever heard.

But I suspect my experience of those thunderous roosters was nothing compared to what it must have been like for Peter, on that fateful night when the one rooster crowed and caught him out in one of history's most infamous lies.

“Wait, aren't you one of his disciples?”

“No.”

“But we thought we saw you with him.”

“No. No, really, that's not possible.”

“Are you sure, cause I could swear I saw you earlier, in the garden, when we arrested him.”

“No, I'm sorry but you must be mistaken.”

Cockadoodle-do!

What must that have been like, for Peter? You follow Jesus literally for years. You walk with him down remote country roads, sometimes under a hot sun, sometimes in pelting rain, sometimes through the dust, sometimes through the mud -- all just so you can watch him and learn from him.

You eat every meal with him. Sometimes you go hungry with him when the food is scarce, or the money to buy it has run short, and he opts not to multiply the meager provisions you have.

You grow closer and closer to him by the day. You bear witness to everything he says and does, until finally you begin to believe with your whole heart that what he says is true. That he is who claims to be.

And then, just when he needs you the most, after everything he's done for you, right in his moment of crisis, you deny you've ever met him.

Does your heart break the very next minute?

Today marks our third installment of our Lenten sermon series: the Ridiculous Journey, following a nobody from nowhere.

As you know we're using the big stories in the Gospel of John as our framework for this journey. And we're following along with Jesus as he travels toward Jerusalem and his final destiny.

Except today we get not one but two stories. They're both significant in their own right, but I wanted to read both of them this morning because the first story sets the stage for the second.

Judas has already betrayed Jesus. Just a few hours earlier he excused himself from the very last meal Jesus will share with his core followers. He slipped out into the night and went straight to the authorities, assuring them he knows where Jesus is, and selling his services to them as their guide.

Now he returns to do the real dirty work. He brings with him -- and the text is very clear and very specific about this -- he brings with him a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

You think, how can this have happened? Jesus was such a good guy. All he ever did was feed the hungry. All he ever did was offer compassion to the brokenhearted. All he ever did was offer healing to the blind and the sick, and forgiveness and welcome to people whom society had shamed and excluded.

All he's ever done is call for peace, and insist on love.

And that's the problem. The people loved him for it. The crowds that now followed him were huge, as were the cheering throngs that welcomed him when he arrived in new places, including as we'll see in just a few more weeks, the capital.

Obviously, he represented a threat to the Empire. Of course the authorities weren't going to tolerate him.

Their rule is based on privilege, their privilege is sustained by power, their power backed by weapons, weapons wielded by a professional soldiers and by the religious police, whom the ruling elite have paid off handsomely to do their bidding.

Of course they're going to arrest him. What other option do they have? Let his followers organize and march and protest? Not a chance.

So that part is easy to understand.

It's even relatively easy to understand Judas's motivation. Maybe he had been racking up some debts along the way. Maybe he needed to sell some secrets to raise some quick cash to pay off his creditors, or to purchase the expensive medicine he needed to keep his youngest son alive.

People sell out all the time, for lots of different reasons.

But Peter's a different story. Why would he deny that he was one of Jesus's most loyal followers? Yes, he's chronically impulsive but he's as faithful as they come. Why would he now suddenly prove himself to be unfaithful? Why would he lie about knowing Jesus?

The truth is we have no idea.

What we do know that this is not the first time Peter has gone off the rails, or the first worst sound he's ever heard.

Earlier, when it begins to dawn on Peter that Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, he tries to steer his teacher in a different direction, away from this final confrontation, toward a different future, a different outcome.

Prompting Jesus to rebuke him in the strongest possible terms: “Get behind me Satan.”

Which is why I’d like to think that as Peter reflects on this night he’ll remember a different sound.

As he reflects on this whole fateful journey that he and the disciples have been on, this ridiculous journey of following this nobody from nowhere, I’d like to think that he will remember the sound that came before that cheeky rooster outed him as both as disciple and as a fallible human being.

That he will remember the best sound he has ever heard.

The sound of the bread being broken as Jesus sat at table with his disciples one last time. The sound of new wine being poured.

The sound of Jesus’ voice as he looked this impulsive, imperfect disciple right in the eye and declared: *This bread is my body, Peter. It’s going to cost me everything. And it’s given for you.*