

Sleeping, Denying, or Following

April 19, 2019 – Good Friday

As I consider the very rich scriptures for Good Friday, it strikes me that there are three types of disciples represented. I might say three types of Christians, although the word “Christian” was not used for a couple decades after the death of Christ. We have the sleepers, the deniers, and the followers; and I suspect that most of us have, as some time in our lives, been in all three roles.

You know the story, Jesus, aware of what his future holds, goes to the garden to pray; and he takes his closest friends with him. He asks the disciples to wait for him; and, not once but three times, he returns to his friends and finds them asleep. Now we must assume that the disciples did not understand the gravity of the situation; but, putting that aside, they were sleeping at this critical moment in the life of their leader.

How often do we sleep through the critical moments? How often do we become aware of a serious situation, be it political or social or environmental or economic; and we choose to “sleep through it.” We decide to let someone else take the lead, let someone else do the hard work, let someone else “stick their neck out.” We’ll sit back and watch, or maybe we’ll fall asleep. After all, it’s been a hard day. We’ve all been there – thinking I “should” get involved, whatever involved means. I should write my congressman. I should be more socially active. I should volunteer more. I should reduce my carbon footprint. I could probably list a hundred “should’s” and I dare say that at least a few of them would apply to all of us. And, instead of responding, instead of saying “I will do. . .” we sleep. We ignore the situation.

Then there are the deniers, the Peter’s in the world. Now, Good Friday can be really hard on Peter; and before I beat Peter up too badly, I remind you that Peter went on to found the church in Rome. It would be hard to name of more significant disciple than Peter; but, it took some time for Peter to grow into his leadership role. Maybe it was a question of maturity; but the Peter portrayed in the gospels is young, impetuous, and always ready to fight – that is until that Thursday evening in the courtyard when, to admit being a follower of Jesus might have gotten him arrested as well. At that point, Peter says what? “I do not know the man.”

Now, I’m not sure that any of us have every denied “knowing” Jesus. I’m not aware that I have; but there have certainly been many times when I have not lived up to my Christian call, times when I have failed to share the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, times when my silence has fallen somewhere between sleeping and outward denial. You know, I usually wear a cross around my neck – usually one of two crosses. (I’m not wearing one tonight, because of the plainness of the day. No ornamentation is appropriate.) Both of my crosses were gifts from my wife, Ginny. The one that I wear when I’m more dressed up, is silver, and was a birthday gift the first birthday we were married, long before I went into the

ministry. The cross I wear with more casual clothing is wooden, a gift that Ginny brought back from Costa Rica, when she was there on a mission trip. But there are times, in certain situations that I'll take the cross off, and put it in my pocket, because I'm entering a setting in which I don't want to be "in your face" about my Christianity. I do not wear a cross when I attend services of non-Christian faiths; and I sometimes do not wear a cross when I enter certain business meetings. I've struggled with that, personally. Am I denying Christ, when I intentionally take off the cross. I'd like to think that I am simply meeting others where they might be, and not creating what could be an uncomfortable situation. But that really makes a very nice excuse. And, all this being said, I don't wear the cross so much as a "billboard" for Jesus Christ. I wear it as a personal reminder of who I am, and whose I am.

So, while some of you don't regularly wear crosses; I suspect that we have all had occasions when we felt called to lift or to live the Gospel, and we have said no, not now, not here. I'd rather not "stick my neck out."

But then, there is my favorite character in the entire Gospel of Mark, the unnamed young man who followed Jesus after his arrest, after everyone else had fled. I preached about him last Good Friday; and, if you remember everything I said then, forgive me for repeating myself. But I can't resist, on my last Good Friday Sermon from this pulpit to talk about him again. It's just three verses in Mark: "They all (hear that "they all") forsook him, and fled. And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked." Who was this kid? The other Gospel writers never mention him. In the original Greek, he's simply called the *neaniskos*. The word simply means "a young man." But the key – *neaniskos* is not a common Greek word. It only appears one other place in the entire Bible. In Mark's Gospel, on Easter Sunday, it is the young man who announces the risen Christ. Matthew says there was an angel at the tomb. Luke says there were two men in dazzling apparel; but in Mark it's simply a young man, a *neaniskos*, in a white robe.

Who was this young man? I think the young man is you. I think the young man is me. I think the young man is every Christian who decided to "stick their neck out," to follow where others have fled, to follow and to announce the Good News of the resurrection.

Friends, every day we face choices in our lives. And in most of those choices, we have options: we can sleep, ignoring this situation; we can deny the situation and our Christian call; or we can follow in the path of the risen Christ. May all of us, you and I, be a modern day *neaniskos*, following when others have fled; and announcing the Good News of the Gospel in our thoughts, in our words, and in our actions. Amen.

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