

“And So It Begins” - Stephanie Sorge, 3.8.26

What do you do when the very foundation of your world is shaken or destroyed? Following Jesus was never exactly business as usual, but everything changed in the garden. The disciples’ entire world was torn apart, turned upside down, and life would never be the same again. They experienced a shared traumatic event that would become part of their before and after.

Maybe they first heard the sounds of people approaching, or maybe they saw the lanterns and torches light up the dark, night sky. They had been fearing the worst, and the worst was closing in. Soldiers and guards led the way, expecting Jesus’s friends to hide him. Maybe they wanted to, but Jesus didn’t allow that. He immediately identified himself with the statement repeated in different ways throughout the Gospel: “I am.” That statement is now powerful enough to make his captors fall to the ground. Jesus demands that his followers be allowed to go - the shepherd protecting the sheep, to the end. The sheep scatter away, into the night.

Jesus is taken into custody and brought... where? To the house of the high priest’s father-in-law, Annas. Caiaphas is the current high priest, and while he’s mentioned, he doesn’t play a role in this part of the story. Annas, his father-in-law, is the former high priest, no longer in the position, but still revered as if he were.

He still held influence and commanded loyalty. When one of the guards slaps Jesus, it's the kind of reaction that would only be elicited by a high level of devotion and loyalty, not just a hired body. Annas is powerful.

What's really happened is this: Jesus has been arrested, detained, and brought before an extra-judicial group to mete out a punishment that had already been decided. It's a sham of a trial, and everyone there knows it. No witnesses are called forward, and Jesus's response highlights that fact. If this cabal was really interested in the details, they could have called any number of people to testify, but they didn't. When Jesus challenges them, they don't correct course, they respond with the only other power available to them: violence.

Annas and the others were not political leaders like Pilate, who we'll see next week. They were shadow powers, thriving in concealment and closed systems. There can certainly be overlap between the two, but in some ways, the latter is more insidious. These powers operate outside of processes of justice and accountability, and when threatened, they will do anything to retain their power. There are many ways to destroy the lives of those who challenge those powers that don't resort to physical violence, but when all else fails, there's always a nuclear option.

In the midst of all of this, Jesus stands firm, speaking the truth to power, and using that truth to unmask evil systems. When weapons are drawn, and even when he is struck, Jesus refuses to respond in violence. Systems that thrive on corruption and deception have no other resort. When the threat of power is not enough to get what they want, swords are drawn, and bombs are dropped. Jesus unmasks this evil for what it is.

Peter watches all of this from a safe distance. He often gets a bad rap. He acts first, speaks second, and anything else is a distant third. Jesus knew that Peter would deny him, and even told Peter in advance. Peter strenuously objected, but here he is, just a few hours later, denying Jesus, just as Jesus said he would.

We might judge Peter for his denial, but when most of the other disciples scattered, Peter followed. What else could he do? He had already tried violence in the garden. That hadn't worked out well. He had no hope of freeing Jesus from his captors. Even if he had spoken up for Jesus, it wouldn't have changed anything in the sham interrogation. What could he do but watch and wait to see what would happen? He may not have even known what he was saying or doing. He was cold and scared. He was lost, like a sheep without a shepherd. When asked if he was a follower of Jesus, he said, "I am not."

Throughout this Gospel, Jesus revealed who he was through various “I am” statements. The first, simply “I am,” was said in response to the woman at the well. Later, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the gate,” “I am the vine,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and more. At this point, he has said all he needs to say about who he is. Now all they need to know is “I am.” You’re looking for Jesus of Nazareth? I am. Ego eimi. In contrast, Peter’s denial is the negation - ouk eimi - “I am not.”

Three little words - two in Greek - say so much. I am not. The life I envisioned for myself - the ways I defined my very existence - are no more. The world around me is so frightening, or heartbreaking, or infuriating. I am not powerful enough to do anything to change that. The real power in this world is so insidious - I am not at the table, I have no voice. When everything falls apart - what else can we say?

There isn’t much Peter or anyone else can do when all of this unfolds, except watch, wait, and witness. As tempting as it could have been to run and hide in a safe place, Peter walked into the lion’s den. As scared as he may have been, he kept watch. Yes, he denied Jesus, but behind each “ouk eimi” lies a lament. Are you his follower? I was, but this changes everything. So I guess... I am not. Aren’t you his follower? He taught us, he loved us, and I thought I would stick

with him to the end, but I have failed, so I guess... I'm not. Aren't you the one who took up a sword to defend him? What power do I have? Do you think I'm here to try to save him? No, I am not!

Peter denied Jesus. Thrice. After that third denial, he remained in the courtyard, warming himself by the fire, as Jesus was transferred to Caiaphas and then Pilate. If we didn't know better, we might think this was the end of Peter's storyline. The next time we see Peter is on the morning of the resurrection. He sees the empty tomb, and then he isn't named again until the final chapter of John, when he just wants to go fishing.

The fishing excursion leads to another encounter with Jesus. After a fruitless night of fishing, Jesus appears and tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat. They do, and they end up with an overflowing net - 153 fish, to be exact. Peter and the others are, once again, fed by Jesus. After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Jesus reverts to Peter's identity back when he first encountered Jesus - a fisherman named Simon, the son of John. There on the beach, Jesus extends a new invitation to follow him. Peter moves from the threefold denial to affirming his love for Jesus, three times over. In doing so, he reclaims his identity as a disciple, and is commissioned to a

new role of servant leadership. When Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is no longer with them, Peter will care for the flock.

Jesus also warns that things would get much harder for Peter, who would eventually find himself on the receiving end of the Empire's capital punishment. There were still many things for him to fear, legitimately, but he refused to let his fear keep him from sharing the Gospel truth. He had witnessed God's power, in Jesus Christ, prevail over the powers of this world. Love is greater than fear.

We know this isn't the end of Peter's story. Not by a long shot. Even so, things look pretty bleak. When the whole world is on fire around us, or we feel most beaten down and unable to move forward, when we think we're at our end, remember this: there's more to the story. It's not about us - it's about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who will not lose a single sheep. It's about Jesus, the light of the world, who shines hope into the deepest crevices of despair. It's about Jesus - "I am," - who was, and is, and is to come. It's about what God is doing - what is still unfolding - transforming this world and bringing the powers that be to their knees. It's about the love of God, which conquers all. Love may not look so victorious these days, but remember: it's not the end of the story. It's just beginning.