

## **MADE STRONG IN THE BROKEN PLACES**

Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

*“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan will sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”*

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley

at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

March 25, 2012

In his novel *Farewell to Arms*, author Ernest Hemingway writes this: “The world has a way of breaking everyone; but afterward, some are made strong in the broken places.” Simon Peter was one who had to be broken, and then was made strong in the broken places. This is what his hero, Jesus, was trying to tell him in the Upper Room, just before his three-fold denial:

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Did you find yourself in the Gospel Lesson this morning--this dramatic moment when Peter had followed the mob into the High Priest's courtyard? Jesus was going through His first interrogation at the hands of the religious leaders. There, in the glow of a campfire, Simon Peter's faith did fail him; or so it seemed. At least his courage failed him. A bony finger of accusation comes out of the shadows, “You are one of them!” And Peter blurts out the unimaginable: “I don't know what you are talking about; I don't even know the man!” Once, twice, three times. A rooster crows in the distance; and across the courtyard Jesus, in chains, turns around and looks at Peter. And Peter remembers what the Lord had told him in the Upper Room.

Has the rooster crowed in your life? For some it can be an awful moment, nearly as dramatic as Peter's. We're caught betraying everything we have stood for; we find ourselves exposed doing something or saying something that is unimaginable to us. “We were not ourselves,” we might say. Some are caught in shady business deals; others having been caught in flirtations or infidelity; still others are overheard and reported gossiping or saying something

unflattering about another. And it seems that our whole world is falling down around us.

But I hope we can develop a sensitivity of soul when, in our Prayer of Confession silent moments, we can hear the rooster crowing perhaps further in the distance. More subtle sins that are revealed, as the Holy Spirit taps us on the shoulder...reminding us of a moment when we have been harsh in our judgments, hurtful in our words...and the words come back to us in a way we are able to hear them as the poison darts that they are, wounding a spirit. Maybe the rooster crows in the distance when we remember an opportunity we had to help someone, say a kind word, do something of practical support to someone in need...but well, we were busy, rushing, and our anxiety drove us to just keep going. "Somebody else will take care of it," we say to comfort ourselves...until that quiet moment when the rooster crows, and we realize that our actions have denied that we know Christ.

When we discover cancer in the body, we don't dismiss it because it is just a small thing. No matter how small, we know it will grow, take over if we don't do something about it. Repentance works like that in our souls...in our relationships, in our careers, in our faith. And only later do we discover that the rooster crowing is, in fact, a wonderful thing...no matter how embarrassing. This "the sifting of saints" is a hard thing, but a necessary thing if we are to be any use at all to the Master.

Have you seen a picture of what Jesus describes here? Perhaps in a *National Geographic* magazine you have seen the threshing floor where farmers from an older world use a pitchfork to toss heaps of grain high into the air, and let the wind separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat is the useful, nutritious part of the grain, the chaff is the shell, of no value to the body. "*Simon, Simon listen! Satan has asked that he might sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you...*" Satan intends it to crush us; but through Jesus' prayers for us, God takes the negative and turns it into a positive.

The sifting of Peter teaches something wonderful about Forgiveness. Forgiveness is not simply the canceling of a debt we owe to God; it is a celebration that God will even use our brokenness, to make us "strong in the broken places." Can anything more wonderful be imagined?! The Lord knew that, for all Peter's promises, his courage would crumble that night...and still, the Lord believed in him! "*But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail; and when you turn back, strengthen your brothers.*"

Friends, can you, in your dark night of the soul when your heart convicts you of some action or some lack of action that has denied that Christ makes any difference at all in your life...can you, at that moment, imagine Jesus praying for you? "*Yes, you will be sifted like wheat; but I have prayed for you,*" says the Lord, "*that your faith may not fail; and when you*

*turn back, strengthen others who have fallen.”*

Now, this Good News rings in my heart in a very personal way. When my wife, Andy, and I went out to California a couple of weeks ago to see our daughter, Megan, and her husband, Megan and I had an early morning run as we always do. Our running together is always talk time for us. We ran a couple of miles down the street as the sun was rising over Los Angeles. We came to a little warehouse building where there were a number of offices, and went into one of them that said, “Sunrise.” We sat around a large table with about 20 men and women, and heard one of them read out of *The Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous, and then each one introduced him or herself. “Hi, I’m Jan, and I am an alcoholic.” “Hi, Jan,” they all said. “Hi, I’m Jack, and I am an alcoholic.” “Hi, Jack.” Each one who had something to say about the step they were working on that day would chime in with some insight or experience from that week that illustrated the truth of that particular step. It came my turn, before my daughter; and I said, “Hi, I’m Dave and I am the father of an alcoholic.” Everyone laughed, and said, “Hi, Dave.” This was an open meeting; most are closed to alcoholics only. But this is why Megan wanted me to go with her, to have an experience of her world as she has been working her program now for six years of grateful sobriety.

When I look at Megan today, all I can say is that she makes me believe in God. No one but Christ could explain such a miracle. But there she is. I can tell part of her story to you, because it is all very public. A few years back, she told her story to my former congregation in Evanston, Illinois, as she was headed off to her first year of seminary in Pasadena, CA. She now ministers to a congregation just north of Pasadena where her continued recovery is well known and she, like Simon Peter, has been made “strong in the broken places.” What got her through that nightmare years ago when the rooster crowed in her life? She was not a practicing Christian at the time; but she knew somehow that Christ was *for* her; she knew, in some sense, that Jesus *prayed for* her; and that we still believed in her. Now it is a joy beyond words.

Let me close with this: Another Presbyterian minister, John Buchanan, tells the story behind a famous painting that hangs in the Vatican, It is by the Italian artist, Caravaggio, titled *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*. It depicts an elderly, yet still muscular, Peter nailed upside down to a Roman cross. The large canvas shows three Romans struggling beneath the weight of the Big Fisherman to bring the cross erect and put it in place. Church tradition teaches that, under Nero’s persecution, Simon Peter had requested this way to die, because he did not deserve to imitate the Lord’s own crucifixion. So this magnificent painting by Caravaggio shows Peter, being lifted up, upside down. His head is lifted off the cross as he appears to be looking around. His face expresses not only the wide eyes of bearing great pain, but also the courage and conviction of one who at last had been faithful to the end.

Art critics have wondered who it was the artist imagined Peter looking for, as his eyes were wide, and his head raised up as if He were scanning the crowds, looking, watching,

watching, watching. Let me suggest that most probably, Simon Peter, now “made strong in the broken places,” was looking, watching, longing in certain hope...for his Lord.

Alleluia! Amen.

Personalities of the Passion:

(4) Simon Peter: *When the Rooster Crows*

Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

*“I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied  
three times that you even know me.”*

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Alleluia! Amen.