

Sermon for Good Friday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Generations before the Romans hung our Jesus on the cross, generations before Judas kissed our Christ in Gethsemane, generations before the Messiah was prophesied in the desert, generations before, Moses ran away. Moses killed a man, you see, an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. Moses killed him, hid his body, and fled. He knew he'd done wrong, but he also knew he'd done right. This world of ours has never been a simple place. And that Moses, a killer on the run, that Moses stumbled onto something incredible. Out in the desert, where desolation and death rule the day, Moses stumbled onto God. And God sent him back. From a land of death to a land of death. Through that death, new life would come. And as God sent Moses away, the man asked God's name. "I Am who I Am," God said. "I Am has sent you."

For Jesus and Judas and Peter, for Pilate and Caiaphas, for all the crowds, for Barabbas and Nicodemus and Joseph, for Mary and Salome, for the servant girl, for Malchus, for centurions and disciples and regular ol' folks, those generations are long ago. Those generations matter, but no one's leading these folks out of Egypt. Staring down the Egypt of the day, Jesus' followers don't know what to do. He just fed them. Washed them. Stopped them from swinging swords. They're helpless. They're scared. And they're worried.

A woman asks Peter, "Are you not with Jesus?" I am not.

The police ask Peter, "Are you not with Jesus?" I am not.

A slave asks Peter, "Are you not with Jesus?" I am not. From the Great I Am to the tragic I am not. While Moses faced down Egypt with God at his back, Jesus turns cheek after lonesome cheek to the blows of Rome. I Am brought him here; I Am Not abandoned him.

In the middle of a modern day graveyard, an ancient church sits where Caiaphas' home once stood. The outside is adorned with a tile mosaic, the figure of Jesus being lowered into a pit awaiting trial. The place is called Saint Peter of Gallicantu, the cock crows, and it holds as painfully sacred the site of Peter's denials. A statue of Christ, bound and praying, marks the entry, twisted hands pleading with I Am to take this cup from him. 'Round back, a similar work, Peter surrounded by a crowd and hiding his knowledge of the holy man inside. But of all the power of that place, distilled down, it's an icon, floating behind the main altar, tucked stories below. There sits Peter, in the bright and cartoonish style, before a tomb, weeping. His shoulders weigh heavy, his eyes pained, his proud brow broken by his own failure and regret. He had the chance to stand for I Am, but he could not. We know what will come for Peter. We know the stories of his preaching and his miracles. We know the stories of the church he founds and the reach his words will have. But I cannot believe he ever lost sight of these few hours. Years blurred by memory and time, but a few hours -- his worst -- clear and perfectly preserved. If Peter had only said something, would anything for Jesus have been different? Doubtful. Peter owning up to his connection to Jesus, I can't imagine that would've saved him from the cross.

But Peter never got the chance before Jesus died to repair the damage done. You see, Jesus' first wounds didn't come at the hands of a soldier. They came from his followers, betraying, denying, hiding, and leaving him, in his last hours, alone. Peter sits by the graveside with that knowledge. He didn't make this happen, but he didn't help either. He had the chance to stand for I Am, but he could not. So there he sits, slumped against a tomb, in the middle of a graveyard, in the middle of a desert. Where death rules the day, and darkness covers the land.

Are you not with Jesus? I am not. I am not. I am not.