

“Peter”

In American history, as the West was settled, there were numerous professional thieves whose names evoked fear throughout the Wild West. There was one in particular who terrorized the Wells Fargo stagecoach line. During his reign of terror, from 1875 to 1883, he stole hundreds of thousands of dollars. No victim ever saw him. No artist ever sketched him. No sheriff could ever track his trail. His name? Black Bart.

John introduces a villain who inflicts a reign of terror. If you’ve ever felt shame and disgrace, it was this villain’s whisper that crushed your heart. If you’ve ever felt alone and abandoned, it was all according to his plan. If you’ve ever felt useless and no good, it was his accusing finger in your face. He doesn’t just want your money. This Black Bart comes to kill, steal, and destroy everything.

What’s his name? Guilt! There is not one among us who hasn’t had the peace of our day robbed by guilt. Whether it was because of a specific event, failure, or betrayal which robbed you of your peace, or maybe your guilt isn’t the result of a moment but of a season in life. You feel as though you squandered your youth, or career, or your money. The result? Guilt!

I have news for you, no matter how hard you work or what you do, Satan will always accuse you and tell you that you could have done more. If you work hard and provide for your family, Satan will whisper in your ear every night that you are neglecting time with your family. If you set aside career goals so that you can have a meaningful family life, Satan will tell you that you squandered your potential. Guilt will always seek to rob you of your peace.

We're in a series called Witnesses to Christ. Today, we meet Peter. Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest named Caiaphas. In that courtyard, we see guilt—Peter's guilt and our own. Beyond the courtyard, we see grace—grace for Peter and grace for us!

To get some context, we rewind the tape and go back to Gethsemane, where we hear the claim. "Peter said to Him, 'Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for You'" (John 13:37).

We've all made that claim. When we confirmed the faith of our Baptism, we answered the question, "Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed remain true to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?" And we said, "I do by the grace of God!" The claim, "I do!" is a serious claim! Like Peter, it seems easy when we are surrounded by the friendly confines of Confirmation Day.

But the rest of our lives is more like Peter in the courtyard of Caiaphas. A servant girl comes up to Peter and says, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” When your classmate or coworker mocks the concept of God and you remain silent, how is that different than Peter saying, ‘I am not’” (John 18:17).

Jesus never promised that life as a disciple is easy. Our life is like Peter in the courtyard. But I have news for you, even when you do stand up and confess your faith in Christ for all to hear, Satan will tell you that you didn’t use the right words. If you use the language of the church and confess the Catechism and the Creed, Satan will tell you that it wasn’t from your heart. If you speak from your heart, Satan will accuse you of making up your own version of God.

He will always tell you that your are guilty. Peter was guilty. We fast-forward to John 21, where Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves Him. Jesus asks the question three times—once for every time Peter had denied his Lord. And each time Peter confesses, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” Peter confessed his guilt. What gave him the faith to do that? While Peter was denying Jesus, Jesus was suffering for Peter.

Two weeks ago, when I told you about Malchus, I told you that you will never be the one in control, so lay your guilt on the One who is in control and the One who has already carried your guilt to the cross and grave.

Jesus doesn't wait until we get our lives all together. Jesus doesn't wait until we overcome our temptations and fight our demons and conquer our sinful desires. Paul tells us that "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In our courtyard, we see guilt. Beyond the courtyard—at the cross—we see grace.

And God's grace is greater than Satan's accusations and the guilt he rains down. Remember Black Bart? It turns out that he was actually nothing to be afraid of. When the authorities tracked him down, they didn't find a bloodthirsty bandit. They found a mild-tempered businessman from Decatur, Illinois. The man pictured storming through the Wild West on his horse was actually so afraid of riding horses that he rode around in a horse-drawn buggy. Black Bart was Charles Boles—the bandit who never once fired a bullet, because he never once loaded his gun!

See your guilt and see Satan for who he really is. A deadly monster? You bet. And guilt is a painful feeling that can do great harm. Of that there is no doubt. He desires nothing more than to rob you of your peace. But count on this—guilt, like Satan, is a defeated enemy who has no bullets left in his gun.

Like Peter, for all of our faults and failings, we are redeemed and received into the peace of the righteousness of Christ who calls us. He is our Mighty Fortress in which we remain so that nothing can rob us of His peace. Amen.