

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When the curtain opens on Scene Two, we see a familiar scene. It is the austere, official chamber where the Sanhedrin hold court. The room is cold and intimidating. It feels even more so when the first characters begin to arrive on stage.

These are the members of the Sanhedrin: the leaders in the land who form the ruling council for the Jews of first-century Palestine. They are a distinguished looking group. They are well-dressed, well-manicured, and well-to-do. Their faces betray the seriousness of the purpose for which they have gathered.

After the members of the council have taken their seats along the front and sides of the chamber, two more men come in. No, actually they do not come in; they are brought in. Chained and raggedy, they are the prisoners who are being called to appear before these assembled leaders.

We in the audience do a double take when we see them. We know these men! They are Peter and John, the beloved men who were part of Jesus' inner circle during his earthly ministry. These apostles had been apprehended and kept in custody. For them, this is judgment day.

These onetime Galilean fishermen look so out-of-place. They find themselves in a setting they never could have imagined just a few years earlier and for a reason they never could have anticipated.

A mere five years ago, they spent their days and nights in boats on the picturesque lake, Galilee, in the north. They lived quiet lives, far from the political

intrigues or theological controversies of Jerusalem. Perhaps they made the annual pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem for the holy days, but that urban setting in the south was a long way from home for them.

There's no doubt that, back in their fishing days, they knew the name of the high priest and members of his household. Perhaps they knew the names and reputations of some of the other men who sat on the council, too. But there was no reciprocal familiarity. Certainly the high priest and the members of the council did not know them. Indeed, probably very few people outside of their little northern hometown of Capernaum knew them.

Now they are known. Indeed, they have become infamous within certain circles of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. In the wake of their recent activities — namely, healing and preaching in Jesus' name in the temple — Peter and John have been apprehended and brought on trial before the leaders of their people.

After the hubbub of whispers among the council members has subsided, the high priest rises to speak. His expression is severe, and his tone is most serious. He points at the prisoners accusingly, reminding them that they have been warned not to speak anymore in the name of Jesus or about him.

Stop to consider the dynamics of this moment.

First, there was the theological component. The point of friction between the apostles and the Sanhedrin was fundamentally a theological one. That is to say, the Jewish leaders opposed and endeavored to silence what Peter and John believed, taught, and preached. But observe that this dispute is not a cordial disagreement among equals. No, these largely unschooled laymen were appearing before the religious leaders of the land. The members of this ruling council included the professional clergy, biblical scholars, and theologians-in-

residence. These were men of sophisticated training, expert in the scriptures and conversant in all matters of doctrine.

Furthermore, the culture was not the think-and-let-think atmosphere of pluralism that marks our day. No, there was an assumed standard of right and wrong, of truth and falsehood, and Peter and John stood before the men in charge of making those distinctions.

The priests and scribes, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were not always in agreement with one another. But they were the ones who drew the lines of dogma, and so when they were unanimous in calling something foul, that was the final word. They were insistent that Peter and John should cease to preach and teach in Jesus' name.

In addition to the theological dynamic, there was also the legal reality that these ordinary and previously unimportant men found themselves in serious trouble with the authorities. And this was no trivial matter. For they were not just appearing before the local sheriff or in the county courthouse. No, they had been hauled in before the very leaders of the land. The only situation that could have been more severe for them would have been a trial before the Roman governor of the province himself, and they had seen firsthand this same group of Jewish leaders forward Jesus' case to precisely that bar.

That brings us to the third and most compelling dynamic: recent history.

The episode recorded in Acts 5 does not appear to be very far removed from the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost came only a matter of weeks after Jesus' ascension. His ascension had been just a few weeks after his death and resurrection. In other words, when Peter and John stood before the members of the Sanhedrin, it may not have been very long at all — perhaps just a few months — since Jesus himself had stood on trial before the very same group.

I imagined at the outset that a curtain was opening on a scene — Peter and John on trial before the ruling council — and I called it Scene Two. Now let's rewind and take a look at Scene One.

The action takes place in the same chamber. The same well-dressed and serious characters are there, occupying their seats of judgment. Again, they have a prisoner dragged before them. It's Jesus.

His arrest had been a conspiracy, achieved by a covert operation at night. The charges were largely fictitious and most of the testimony a sham. But these leaders, who had been vigorously antagonistic to Jesus for some time, were determined to bring this trial to a very specific conclusion, no matter what contortions of justice would be required.

The incongruities of testimony were a nuisance, Herod's foolishness was an annoyance, and Pilate's uncharacteristic reticence to kill a man was a surprising obstacle. Ultimately, though, they got what they wanted.

Meanwhile, during the scene of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin in this familiar chamber, we overhear some voices from offstage. Some simultaneous dialogue is occurring nearby. We cannot make out the words, at first; only the tone. We sense accusation, and we can detect an escalating anxiety and defensiveness in one man's voice. Finally, we hear that voice loudly from offstage, and we recognize it as unmistakably Peter's. We hear him swearing and cursing as he cries out, "I don't know him!"

It had been a long and trying night, you recall.

It had begun with such festivity and good cheer. Jesus and his disciples were sitting down at table to enjoy and celebrate the Passover meal together. But the atmosphere of that supper became quite unsettling as Jesus spoke. He talked about his broken body and his shed blood. He talked about one of his

close associates betraying him. He also spoke very specifically about Peter denying him.

What could it all mean?

Then they went out of the city and up into the Mount of Olives. It was late in the evening and the disciples were tired. But Jesus was eager to stay in a garden there and pray. He went off by himself, returning occasionally to awaken his drowsy followers. Then, suddenly, the quietness of the place was shattered.

It all happened so quickly: torches, spears, and clubs; menacing guards accompanied by Judas; a kiss and a confrontation; a swing of a sword and a rebuke. Then, within just a few minutes, the garden was quiet again. Jesus was gone: apprehended by the mob and the disciples were gone; they had fled into the night.

Peter had enough temerity to follow rather than flee. He followed at some safe distance, to be sure, but he wanted to see what was going to happen to his friend and Lord. And there, not far outside the chamber where Jesus was on trial before the leaders of the land, Peter warmed himself by a fire.

He was tired and cold, confused and scared. He must have felt like a spy behind enemy lines there in the courtyard, desperately hoping he would not be recognized or discovered. Then it happened; the thing he most dreaded. Someone noticed him.

He tried at first to brush aside the pointing finger as a case of mistaken identity, but he couldn't do it. There was another accusation, followed by a more insistent denial. Then, finally, a third person connected the dots between Peter and Jesus, at which point Peter swore emphatically that he did not know Jesus.

The sound of the rooster awakened Peter's conscience to what he had done, and he disappeared into the darkness, weeping bitterly.

That wasn't so long ago. There really weren't very many weeks between Scene One and Scene Two. In the first scene, Jesus was on trial in the austere chamber, and Peter waited timidly outside. He was so frightened by what was happening to Jesus that he tried to dissociate himself entirely from his Lord.

A few months later, Peter himself was in that dreaded chamber. The same men who had arranged for the arrest and execution of Jesus now point their fingers at him. And the same man, who had denied his Lord three times not long before, was commanded by the authorities to deny him once again.

That night in the courtyard, Peter was on the fringe of danger, but this time he was in the crosshairs. What would he do? How could he escape?

Peter addressed the members of the Sanhedrin: "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (v. 29). And with that bit of holy defiance, Peter went on to make his fearless proclamation about Jesus as the Christ of God: crucified, risen, and exalted.

We set the two scenes side by side, and we can hardly believe that it's the same man. How can it be that the one, who just a matter of weeks before crumbled beneath a lesser pressure, should be so courageous now in the very face of what he most feared? Is this the same Peter?

No, it's not. Not really. For two pivotal things have happened between Scene One and Scene Two. Jesus had risen, and the Spirit had come. Peter was a new man.

In the end, of course, all of *our* stories should read like Peter's. Let my story be called "A Tale of Two Waynes." Let yours be a story of two Craigs or two Barbaras, two Davids or two Lindas. Our before-and-after pictures, you see, are our testimonies. They are the Exhibit A in the proof of our salvation. Just as creation bears witness to the creator, so my re-creation and yours bear witness

to our redeemer. The surest proof that Jesus is alive is what happens to his followers between Scene One and Scene Two.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.