



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Sight-Reading”

John 13:36-38, John 18:15-18, 25-27

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I like to practice things before I do them. I practice my sermons. On any given Sunday you can find me in the sanctuary beginning around 7:45 practicing. So, no surprise, the first time that I preached on Easter, I was prepared. Let's just say I spent many, many hours writing and rewriting and rehearsing that sermon. This was a good thing because in the middle of my well-practiced, carefully constructed sermon, the fire alarm went off. Strobe light, siren, and a piercing voice saying “This is a fire emergency. This is a fire emergency.” My colleague sprinted out of the sanctuary to investigate, discovered it was a false alarm, turned it off and then, from the back of the sanctuary said, “All clear. You can continue.”

“Easy for you to say,” I responded. But the truth is it was pretty easy for me to pick up where I had left off. Because I had practiced.

We practice all sorts of things. Lawyers practice law. Doctors practice medicine. Expectant parents practice holding, diapering, feeding, bathing a newborn.

Musicians practice. (*Addressed to the New World Singers in the Sanctuary . . .*) That wasn't the first time you sang that piece, was it? In order to sing is so beautifully, you put in hours and hours of rehearsal.

Athletes practice. Basketball players practice their shots incessantly so that when the big game comes and their big moment arrives they will be ready.

Things go easier when you practice ahead of time.

That day in Jerusalem, Peter doesn't have time to practice. He isn't prepared. He's not ready. There hasn't been a rehearsal. And – even if he has the time to do so, I'm not sure Peter is a practicing kind of guy. He doesn't like to rehearse. It's not in his playbook.

Even on his good days, Peter isn't known for thinking things through. He's impetuous, a man of action who doesn't sit around much pondering, but speaks, acts. Even on his good days, Peter isn't known for his careful preparation. And this isn't a good day. It's a terrible day. Or better put, it's a terrible night.

That night starts off promising enough with a meal shared by Jesus with his friends. In John's gospel, Jesus talks at that meal. A lot. He speaks about the importance of love, the nature of truth, the challenges that the disciples will face in the days to come. I'm not sure that Peter takes it all in. He isn't a “listening-to-a-really-long-speech-kind-of guy.” But he is all ears when Jesus says that one of the twelve will betray him. Peter objects, then pledges his support: “I'll stick with you to the end. I will die with you if need be.” Jesus responds, “Peter, before the night is out, you will deny me, three times.”

The meal over, Jesus, Peter and the others are off to the garden. Guards come to arrest Jesus. Peter alone does something. He responds. It's what he does. It's not a good response. But it's all he can think of in the

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moment. Because he hasn't had time to practice. He thinks, "These guys aren't arresting Jesus. Not on my watch. No, not on my watch." He springs into action. Peter draws his sword and cuts the ear of one of the guards. He is willing to die for Jesus in that moment. Peter's approach is rejected by none other than Jesus. "Put your sword away, Peter."

Talk about getting your shot blocked. How does Peter feel in that moment? He doesn't have time to ask Jesus, "Hey, if you don't like this way of handling the situation, then what am I supposed to do?"

Peter doesn't have the script. He hasn't been given a copy of the music. He hasn't rehearsed this part. But – to Peter's credit – he doesn't abandon Jesus. Peter follows Jesus into the dark night. He hovers. He stays close. He improvises, makes things up as he goes because he hasn't had time to practice.

Sometimes that's how life comes at us.

Earlier this month, Pedro Vilorio was at work at a McDonald's handing out food and change at the drive-through window. All seemed fine when a customer, an off-duty police officer, placed her order and paid. But when Vilorio returned to the window to give the driver her food, she was no longer breathing, and her foot slipped off the brake.

Two children seated in the back of the vehicle started to scream as the car rolled away, and Vilorio instinctively dove through the carry out window and chased the car. Fortunately, a curb then stopped the car.

"If I would have died to save that woman, I would have done it," Vilorio later said. "My brain was on hero mode."

He then darted back into the McDonald's for help. There was plenty — a paramedic in the drive-thru line came running, helped by two fire rescue team members and a police officer eating breakfast inside the restaurant. The woman was revived with the use of an automated external defibrillator.¹

I'm betting that this situation wasn't covered in employee orientation. Vilorio had no time to practice. It was all instinct. And he saved at least one life that day.

I don't know how I would respond to such a situation. I really don't know. I like to practice. I like to rehearse. I need a dry run or two. I think it's a good thing to practice.

Cindy Rigby is a theology professor at Austin Seminary who preached and taught here at Broad Street one Sunday in 2014. Recently she wrote about attending her son's middle school band concert. It was a good concert – good by middle school standards. Folks were ready to head home when the director, Ms. Crowley, announced that there would be another part of the program. She said, "The band, next month, will perform in a competition where they will be required to sight read a piece. They will be given the music on the spot, given eight minutes to prepare, then asked to play it through." She asked the crowd to watch as the band practiced their sight reading event.

The music was handed out and each kid placed it on the music stand without opening it up. Poised on their seats with instruments in the resting position, they focused entirely on Ms. Crowley. She said, "O.K, open your music and let's play." The students did so, but made no move to put instruments to lips or produce any sounds. Ms. Crowley began to conduct, arms raised and moving, humming and gesturing, drawing the students into the piece, measure by measure. The students went right along with her. With instruments still in resting position,

¹<http://www.today.com/food/mcdonald-s-drive-thru-worker-saves-police-officer-t109326> and other sources on the internet.

their eyes darting back and forth from score to teacher, they listened to their director. “Here is the melody; there, a hard rhythm; careful – that’s a B natural; now play up the crescendo. Watch me for the cut off; engage with more passion. And now measure 90 – don’t play B-flat!” This is how Rigby remembers the moment.

Every student now riveted, though not as much now to Ms. Crowley. Somehow, you could tell, they had entered the music itself. The audience forgotten, she had ushered her students and fellow musicians into a piece they had never seen, had never played. And when the eight-minute timer sounded, Ms. Crowley stopped, and invited her company to make the beautiful music that first had claimed them and now become their own. And they – these thirteen-year-old kids – played out loud for the first time, the piece they already knew. They played the music Ms. Crowley invited them to hear, the music they had entered, the music into which they were now inviting us.²

Most days we are handed music we have never seen before. We can set it to the side, reference our ineptitude, feeling badly that we aren’t ready. Or we can open it up and plow right in, doing our best, making it up as we go, hoping to cobble together something that might make the world slightly better tomorrow than it is today.³

But better than both of those options is practice. We people of God – that’s what we do. When we pray, when we read the Bible, when we come here to worship, we practice. We rehearse. When we pass the peace, we rehearse hospitality. When we say together the prayer of confession, we practice humility. When we pray for others, we rehearse compassion. When we share in the Lord’s Supper, we practice what it feels like to be a part of community in which all are welcome.

Holy week begins a week from today. It is the best practice I know – the best preparation for living an authentic life. Fully experiencing Holy Week is one of the best ways I know to rehearse the music of faith, to learn from Jesus, to prepare ourselves for whatever dark nights await us.

The goal – the hope – the best case scenario is that, no matter what music is placed in front of us, our best self shows up and we play our part with some grace and beauty, part of a larger whole.

But, if we can’t pull that off – if our best self doesn’t show up – if we haven’t rehearsed enough or we have practiced the wrong things – if the music is too hard for us to play, that’s OK. God in Jesus offers to Peter and offers to us forgiveness, a second chance.

Back to Peter and his denial. It is just one night. One night out of thousands of nights. You know, you can carry the memory of something like that around with you for the rest of your life. We can only imagine the regret, the shame, the pain that night causes Peter. I bet he replays it again and again in his mind and in retrospect sees how it could have turned out differently. That night is not the end of his story. Peter gets another opportunity to serve God. The Risen Christ forgives Peter and empowers Peter. He goes on to become a great leader in the church – confident, inspiring, brave, wise – a great leader in the church.

When Peter’s second chance comes, and it comes, he is ready.

It’s as if he’s been practicing...

² Cynthia Rigby, “This Hour of Fire,” *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Spring 2007.

³ IBID.