

Last week and this week, our Gospel lessons focus on Peter. Last week and this week, I'm broadening that focus. I'm wanting to look at a number of episodes from Peter's life.

Peter is a wonderful example for us, not because he was some kind of spiritual superhero. Rather, Peter made mistakes, sometimes very large mistakes. He would sometimes move forward, and sometimes would lose ground. And yet he perseveres in following Jesus. And that makes him a very helpful example to look at.

Last week I talked about 4 scenes.

Scene 1 was from our Gospel lessons last week and this week. Simon bar Jonah says that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. In response, Jesus gives him a new nickname: Rocky, Peter. But then as we heard in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus has to take Peter down a peg. When Peter tries to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem and suffering and dying on the cross, Jesus has to say, "Get behind me Satan." In other words Jesus is saying, 'Peter, you're a stumbling block, a road hazard. Don't stand in my way as I make my way to Jerusalem for my Passion.'

Scene 2 is a few weeks later in Jerusalem. Peter says at the Last Supper that he will go to his own death on behalf of Jesus. But just a few hours later he does a 180 and denies even knowing Jesus.

Scene 3 is a few weeks after that, after the Resurrection. The Risen Christ gives Peter 3 chances to undo his 3 denials. And Jesus reinstates Peter as a leader of the Apostles.

Scene 4 is a few weeks after that. On Pentecost, Peter stands up publicly and proclaims the good news that Jesus died and was raised according to God's plan. Peter is no longer denying the cross or denying Jesus. He proclaims the importance of both in a very public way, regardless of the risk to himself.

But there are more things that happen later with Peter. There are more scenes I want to mention.

Scene 5 is about 20 years after Pentecost. The young Christian church is struggling with its first major controversy. The big question was whether or not new gentile converts to Christianity had to become Jews before they became Christians.

The very Jewish church in Jerusalem said basically, "Yes. To be a Christian one must be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses." Peter agreed with them. Paul and the gentile converts in the churches he founded basically said, "No. One can become a Christian directly, without converting to Judaism first."

So Peter has been publicly opposed to the baptism of Gentiles. But one day he's given a vision of clean and unclean food coming down out of heaven for him to eat. The

message: God has a heart for previously unclean gentiles just as much as he does for ritually clean Jews.

And Peter is strong enough and humble enough to admit that God has given him a change of heart and given him new information. Peter might be accused of betraying his faction. People might say that Peter is flip-flopping. But with this new revelation from God, Peter changes his position, and does so very publicly. And thus, Peter weighs in heavily against the view that is popular in his own community and throws his full support to Paul's position. And Peter convinces others to do the same. Peter does what he thinks is right, even at the risk of alienating his own community, and his rock-solid leadership helps get the church through its first major crisis.

But then there's scene 6, shortly afterwards. Peter shows that he still has a sandy side. Peter is still not perfect.

Peter goes to Antioch to visit one of Paul's churches. For a while, Peter hangs out with the Gentile Christians. He eats with them, which is a strong and important gesture of friendship in that culture. But then some of Peter's Jewish Christian compadres from Jerusalem come to visit, and Peter stops eating with the Gentiles. Peter was doing the right thing, but then he bows to peer pressure and stops doing the right thing. Fortunately, Paul calls Peter on it, and doesn't let him get away with it. And Peter begins working again to allow Gentiles to be part of the church.

Scene 7 is about 15 years later, around the year 64. It is the only scene I've mentioned that's not from scripture, but it is based on ancient traditions in the church. During the time of the Emperor Nero, there is a heavy persecution of the church. Tradition says that the Christians in Rome convince Peter to escape. 'You're too important, Peter. Get out of Dodge.'

But as the story goes, as Peter is leaving the city, he has a vision of Jesus walking the other way back into Rome. Peter asks, "Quo vadis Domine? (Where are you going Lord?)"

Jesus answers, "I'm going into Rome to be crucified." Peter decides he will not deny his Lord a second time. He will not abandon God's people, the body of Christ, in their suffering. So he turns around and returns to Rome.

And eventually Peter is crucified there, just outside of Rome at a place called Mons Vaticanus, Vatican Hill. But, because Peter doesn't feel worthy to suffer the same type of death as his Lord, he asks to be crucified upside down. And the Roman soldiers oblige. Peter, who once denied Jesus and fled, at the end, takes up his cross and follows him. He dies and is buried there on Vatican Hill. And eventually, an enormous church will be built over his grave.

Simon bar Jonah, who had a very sandy beginning, did eventually live up to his nickname: Rocky, Peter. At first, it looked as if Jesus was a pretty poor carpenter when it came to constructing the Christian church. Peter looked like a very unstable and weak foundation.

But in time, Peter does become rock-like. Like sand which is cemented together to become sandstone, and like sandstone that is heated to become hard quartzite, Peter, through the workings of God, was transformed from unstable and shifting sand into solid rock.

Peter is a good reminder to all of us of what the power of God can do. He's a reminder that God can shape and mold and fashion us if we'll let him.

Peter is also a good reminder for us that the followers of Jesus are not perfect. Peter has good moments and bad moments throughout his life of faith.

It took St. Peter a lifetime to get it right. Sometimes he would take two steps forward then three steps back. He would sometimes get off track, even on his best days.

But Peter persevered. Peter continued to strive to do what God would have him do. And he continued, as best he could, to follow his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And we are called to do the same.