

Contrast is important when telling a story. We see that in books and movies all the time. Take the contrast between the Emperor and Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, for example.

One is old, grey, and hooded, speaking in a sharp, raspy voice and staring out of the shadows with unnatural red and yellow eyes. The other is young and vibrant in every way – a picture of life and health – with a soft, warm voice and bright blue eyes. When the two stand next to each other in Return of the Jedi, you don't even need to hear what they say or be familiar with their history to know that the Emperor is the bad guy and Luke is the good guy. The contrast between them tells the story.

We see similar contrasts in Scripture as well. David and Goliath. One a young shepherd boy. No armor. No sword. Just a slingshot in his hand. The other a giant. Armed to the teeth.

Or the wilderness of Sinai and the land of Canaan. One a wasteland, devoid of food and water, full of rugged terrain and dangers around every corner. The other a virtual paradise. A land flowing with milk and honey. Where there are piles of copper and iron waiting to be scooped up and vineyards ready to be planted.

And it's from these contrasts that God tells a story. David's strength of faith defeating Goliath's strength of arms. The Israelites learning dependence on God in Sinai so that they might receive the blessings of God in Canaan. You see what I mean?

Tonight, we have another contrast that tells a story. The contrast between Jesus and Peter. The story of Peter's denial is told in all four Gospels. But John's Gospel emphasizes the contrast between these two men most of all, because John's Gospel is the only one where the account of Jesus' trial is puzzle-pieced inside of the account of Peter's denial. Inviting us – requiring us – to look at these two men side-by-side and see just how different they are.

We see that playing out in several different ways during this story. The first is in the setting itself. Jesus is on trial. He's standing before a man named Annas, who was the former high priest.

In the Old Testament, the office of high priest was a lifetime office, occupied by the descendants of Aaron. Passed from father to son in a line that was only broken if there was absolutely no son of the current high priest who was found fit to serve the office after his father died. And for around 800 years, that succession of office remained intact. Even through the Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of the Temple, the high priests maintained that lineage from father to son.

And then, around 175 B.C., things fell apart. A Greek king named Antiochus IV, who ruled over Palestine, decided that he should appoint the high priest. And he made the office available to the highest bidder. And pretty soon, men who weren't even Levites, let alone descendants of Aaron, were appointed as high priests. Each for a brief term of office, so that whoever was in power over the region could extract an ongoing bribe.

And so it was that a wealthy man named Annas bribed his way into the chief priest's office. And when he decided he didn't want the job anymore, he bribed his way into having his son-in-law Caiaphas made high priest. And he would later go on to bribe his way into making each of his five sons high priests.

The high priest's office, one that should have been a symbol of holiness, the chief mediator between God and his people, had become a symbol of utter corruption. A symbol of greed and pride and power. And yet, here they sat, Annas and Caiaphas, in judgement over Jesus. Pretending to seek justice, but really holding onto their authority through money and political influence.

And in the face of these men and all of their wealth and political power, Jesus doesn't flinch. Not once. He barely dignifies their questions with any response at all. And when he does speak, he throws everything they've said back in their faces.

They question him about his teaching. “You heard me teach.” They question him about his disciples. “Go talk to them.” They slap him across the face for his defiance. “You know I'm right.”

Jesus is many things. Kind. Humble. Compassionate. Generous. Merciful. Things that are oftentimes equated with weakness. But they're not. He's proof of that.

Jesus is many things. But he is not weak. He will not yield to these corrupt men. He will not give an inch to their lies or treachery. He will not make their bloodlust and murder any easier on them. He is the rock, the cornerstone, upon which they will stumble. Because he certainly isn't going to move.

No, if you want to see weakness, go look outside the trial, in the courtyard. There you'll find the weakest man you've ever seen. Simon Peter. A man who insisted that he would die by Jesus' side. And yet is scared of a servant girl. A servant girl! Not the high priest. Not the king. Not the governor. Not even a soldier. A little servant girl.

Simon Peter. A man who bravely drew his sword to cut off a helpless servant's ear. But now won't accept responsibility for that attack to his victim's family. He is a complete coward. He is the opposite of Jesus.

And that's displayed even in the words he says. In the passage just before this, when the soldiers come looking for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, St John says that Jesus repeatedly told them, "I am he." Jesus is Yahweh, Jehovah, the great "I AM." And simply saying those words out-loud drops the soldiers to their knees.

But now? Peter is asked three times, "Aren't you Jesus' disciple?" And instead of echoing his Lord and saying three times, just like him, "I am he," Peter does the opposite. He says three times, "I am... not."

You're definitely not Jesus, that's for sure, Peter. That contrast couldn't be more evident. But then again... we're not Jesus either. No one is Jesus, except Jesus.

Because this isn't Peter's story. This is Jesus' story. John makes that plain to us. He doesn't tell us how Peter reacts when he hears the rooster crow. He doesn't tell us where Peter goes or what he does. This isn't Peter's story. This is Jesus' story.

So why say anything about Peter at all? Well, showing us Peter's weakness exists for two reasons. First, it contrasts against the absolutely divine strength that Jesus showed.

Because, honestly, it's easy for me to stand up here and call Peter a coward. But if I were put into Peter's shoes, would I respond any differently? I'd like to think so. But that's probably my sinful pride talking. Peter said the same thing to Jesus. "Even everyone falls away, I never will." And then he did. Just like you would. Just like I would.

No, the strength that Jesus showed was something more than just simply human willpower and determination. It's the strength that comes from faith. Perfect faith. Faith in the Father's wisdom. Faith in the Father's power. Faith in the Father's love. Jesus had perfect, unwavering faith in His Father's will. And that gave him strength to stand against corrupt chief priests, corrupt kings, and corrupt governors. Jesus had perfect faith and that gave him perfect strength.

But Peter's weakness exists for another reason. It exists to set up another contrast that tells another story. A contrast between Peter's failure and Christ's forgiveness.

Because this isn't the last time we hear from Peter. After the Resurrection, we hear from Peter again. And once again, Peter is warming himself over a fire. Not in the courtyard of Annas, but a cooking fire by the Sea of Galilee, eating breakfast with Jesus.

Three times, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times, Peter responds, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Three times, Jesus tells him to feed his sheep.

Again, you might be tempted to make this a story about Peter. But it's not. This isn't Peter's story. This is Jesus' story. This is the story of Jesus' forgiveness.

Because, you see, Jesus is perfect. He has perfect faith in his Father. Perfect strength in the face of crucifixion and death. And perfect forgiveness for men like Peter. For men and women like you and me.

Peter is weak. We are weak. Peter is cowardly. We are cowardly. Peter is a sinner. We are sinners. Jesus is none of those things. But as St Paul tells us in our Epistle lesson, we boast all the more gladly of our weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon us. For when we are weak, then we are strong.

Contrast is important when telling a story. The contrast between good and evil. The contrast between strong and weak. The contrast between sin and grace. The contrast between Jesus and me. Amen.