

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters, compared to what lies within us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

# Holy Terrors and Gentle Souls

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STEPHANIE WELLER HANSON

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## Contents

For the Sake of What Will Come: <i>Peter</i>	7
Holy Boy: <i>Patrick</i>	22
When Heward Jumped Down from the Wall: <i>Boniface</i>	37
The Unsuitable Princess: <i>Elizabeth of Hungary</i>	54
The Holy Terror: <i>Catherine of Siena</i>	67
The One Who Is with Me Is Kind: <i>Teresa of Ávila</i>	82
God Alone: <i>Francis Xavier</i>	98
The Gentle Mother: <i>Elizabeth Ann Seton</i>	113
Sacred Fire: <i>Frédéric Ozanam</i>	129
The Arithmetic of Love: <i>Archbishop Oscar Romero</i>	145

## For the Sake of What Will Come

### Peter

Simon Peter was a Hebrew fisherman living in Galilee when Jesus called him. He worked with his brother Andrew, and with John, James, and their father, Zebedee. We know that Peter was married because of the story in Matthew about Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law. It is reasonable to assume that Peter was relatively poor, and that he probably could not read or write. Yet Peter's personality shines through the New Testament. He was warmhearted and impetuous, a man always ready with an answer, even if it was the wrong one. Peter was a natural leader, and capable of radical insight, as in this story, but he could also be downright stubborn.



The Master asked, "Who do the people say the Son of Man is?"

Silence. John and James stared at each other. Nathanael pulled the hood of his cloak

low over his face as if to hide. Well, thought Peter, the March wind was cold. Jesus, in silence, looked north to the high road to Caesarea Philippi, and the three snow-covered peaks of Mount Hermon.

Andrew nudged Peter; but Peter didn't want to speak. The idea was there again, the one that had been humming in his mind for months as he watched the Master preach and heal. It was strange that as Jesus confronted the Pharisees, it only grew stronger.

Thaddaeus, stuttering a little, said, "Some s-say John the Baptist, others Elijah."

"Others say Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." That was Judas, watching from the edges as always.

Peter felt his face going red, as if he were trying to lift the tremendous weight of the idea. He wanted to speak, but he was afraid. Last week Judas had told him that he was a source of trouble. John had agreed. Angry as it made Peter, he knew it was true. He was always putting his foot into a mess, then having to sit down and laboriously wipe it off.

Jesus turned to face them. "But who do you say that I am?"

An explosive question. An answer to upend the world.

The disciples looked at each other, unwilling to speak, but Peter knew the answer. He

felt it in his belly, down to his toes. He could almost grip it in his two hands. He had always known it.

"You are the Messiah," he blurted out. "The Son of the living God." The others stared. For one instant Peter was appalled at his presumption. The next instant, Jesus laughed.

"Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah! Flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." He pulled Peter to his feet, putting his big carpenter's hands on Peter's shoulders. "I tell you, you are Peter. On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!"

Peter stared at him, dumbfounded.

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," said Jesus. "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

It was magnificent. It was shocking. He was exalted. He was *not ready*.

"Master!" It was Zacchaeus, hailing them from the road above. The enthusiastic little fellow had become the leader of the other disciples on this trip. He was always needing to speak with the Master.

Peter groaned—he had so many questions! How was he to begin to fathom these things?

Jesus squeezed his shoulder. "We'll talk tonight."

But that night there was no time. John and James took Peter aside to ask his understanding of one of Jesus' parables. And his brother Andrew was busy telling childhood stories of Peter to Miriam of Magdala. Andrew looked at Peter now and again with a new expression in his eyes—as if Peter had grown suddenly taller in the space of six hours. It began to worry Peter.

The next day was just as harried. The growing size of the party didn't help. Five days ago, they had stopped to see Miriam of Magdala on their way north. The sisters from Bethany were staying with her. After talking to Jesus, Miriam of Magdala, Martha and Miriam of Bethany, and nine other followers asked to come with them. Now they were a caravan of thirty, with donkeys carrying food and water, and pots banging as they walked.

Peter was tired and feeling glum. They had walked seventeen miles today. Jesus strode ahead, silent and driven again, like a saiboat running before a strong wind. Ever since the Baptist's death he'd been this way, focused on some distant, urgent task of which he said nothing. In late afternoon, Jesus led the Twelve down to refill their water skins from the Jordan. It was warmer in the valley out of the wind. Jesus sat down and drew with a stick in the crusted sand.

"My friends," he said, "I must go to Jerusalem."

The hair on the back of Peter's neck rose. Trouble for sure, perhaps even danger. The elders, priests, and scribes were arrayed against Jesus like a Roman Legion.

John nudged Peter. "Say something. Tell him he must not do this."

There it was again; he was the leader, the spokesman. He cleared his throat. "Wouldn't it be better to stay away for now?"

Jesus looked up at Peter. His brown eyes seemed like deep water in shadow, their light eclipsed.

Jesus seemed to weigh each word separately. "I am destined to go to Jerusalem," he said slowly. "I will suffer there at the hands of the elders and priests and scribes. I will be put to death—"

"No!" Peter cried.

"—and I will be raised up on the third day."

"What?" said Nathanael.

Thaddaeus stuttered, "Wh-when will this happen, Lord?"

"Will this help our cause?" That was Judas.

John said, "But if you are the Messiah, can't you—"

Jesus held up a hand. "Let it be for now. But speak of these things to no one." He

climbed the hill ahead of them, embraced by the women as he moved through them to the road.

A rough wind sprang up from the west, driving sand and grit into their eyes. The disciples walked at the rear, talking in low voices. Peter lagged at the very end. He longed to be in the Temple in Jerusalem, to throw himself down before the Most High and beg for Jesus' life. He tightened his cloak against the wind and began to pray.

*Most High, how can this be your will for Jesus? Look at us! We would be like sheep without a shepherd if he dies. We need him. Your people need him. Please—let this not come to pass!* He longed for assurance, for an answer, but there was none. Was it possible that this future horror was the will of God? Was he gainsaying the will of the Most High? No, it was impossible! This could not be God's plan!

John and James dropped back to him. "This is a calamity!" rasped James. "How can the Master speak of such a thing? The others hesitate to speak, but I say we must stop him."

John gripped Peter's arm. "Speak for us, Peter! Talk to Jesus. Make him change his mind!"

Peter groaned in distress. Was *this* a sign, a confirmation from the Holy One? It was what

he wanted to say. It must be right. He walked ahead. The Master was talking with Martha and Miriam. Peter tried to stay back, to wait patiently, but urgent, fearful words rattled through his brain.

"Lord, I must speak with you!" His words came out louder than he expected.

The sisters turned to look at him. Martha's eyes snapped a little. She was a solid, robust woman, always planning for the Master's needs. So different from her quiet, slender sister.

"Master—" Martha said.

Jesus put a hand on her arm and said, "There will be time." The women dropped back.

"Master, I must speak to you about—what you said to us."

"Peter." Jesus' single word was a sentence, a restraint.

Peter looked over at him. The wind sent the hair streaming back from the Master's head. There was anguish etched in Jesus' face, around his eyes, across his forehead, as if a cruel hand had carved it there with a knife.

Peter gripped Jesus' arm. "God forbid!" he shouted. "God forbid that such a thing should happen to you, Lord!"

Jesus halted and, with a jerk, he threw off Peter's hand. "Get behind me, Satan!" he cried. "You are an *obstacle* to me!"

Suddenly nothing, Peter knelt in the dust. Everyone halted. All eyes were on them. Peter covered his mouth with his hand, wishing God would strike him dumb.

“You think not as God does, but as people do!” said Jesus.

“I want—to protect you,” Peter whispered.

He saw Jesus close his eyes. The wind died. Earth seemed to sway to a stop. Jesus put down a hand and pulled Peter to his feet. He looked directly into Peter’s eyes.

“Brother,” whispered Jesus, “if you wish to come after me, you must deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me.”

Late that night, Peter lay awake in the dark. His hip was aching—from the walking, he supposed. He turned over, but he couldn’t stretch out his legs. Jesus was off praying in the mountains. The men were packed together in one room, the women in the other. *Like fish laid out for market*, Peter thought. He should be grateful that this man Gideon had given them his hospitality. At least they weren’t sleeping outside.

Someone began to whisper at the far side. Someone else answered. Peter tried to ignore the sound, but it was like a cricket clacking in the corner. The voices grew louder. No doubt they thought everyone was asleep.

“I think so,” said one voice clearly.

“Will Jesus name another leader?” asked the other. Peter opened his eyes and stared at Bartholomew’s back.

“He might, after what happened today.” It was John talking to James—about him. With a grunt, Peter threw off his blanket and got to his feet. Sudden silence from them. Peter stepped between the sleepers to the doorway.

The air outside was cold, the wind high. Peter stumped across the courtyard, found wood, and built himself a little fire. He sat before it and rubbed his hands, angry but satisfied. At least here he could be alone. After a time, he heard the door open. He hunched his shoulders, hoping it was someone coming out to relieve himself. The footsteps faded, then returned.

“You act like a man afflicted with a boil.” It was Martha standing on the far side of the fire, her arms crossed.

“Go away,” said Peter.

“No.” She sat on a log at the far side of the fire. She must, he decided, be one of those women who liked to argue for the sheer exercise of it. She was forever fixing things, weaving Jesus a cloak, baking bread for his journeys. Perhaps she thought she could fix him, too.

“The others are talking about the way the Master chastised you,” she said. Peter poked

in the fire with a stick. “The Master has chastised me, too, you know.”

Peter glowered at her. “That’s different.”

Her chin went up. “Why? We are all his followers.”

“Because Jesus expects me to lead. At least, that’s what he told me two days ago.” Peter’s voice began to shake. “But I didn’t lead. I did something terrible. I—injured him somehow.”

She tucked her skirts in around her legs. “What? You think the Master no longer loves you? That he can’t forgive you?”

“It’s not a matter of forgiving me!” shouted Peter. “Everything is confusing now! Everything has changed. It’s—” He waved his hands helplessly. “I’m a fisherman, good for nothing but pulling in the nets. I don’t understand the Master’s words or his plans.” He halted. He must come no nearer to Jesus’ prophecy.

He looked at her. “Does the Lord speak of his plans—to you?” He’d always been curious about what Jesus said to the women. All those hours of talking in private when the Twelve weren’t present.

“He rests with us. He shares his heart,” she said, but her eyes held a mischievous spark. “As to his plans, they’re not all *that* hard to understand.” Peter had an angry retort on his lips. Martha seemed to relent. “All right. Tell me, was it easier in the beginning?”

Peter stared at the fire for a moment. “It seems long ago now. I remember that morning when he came to the Sea of Galilee. He asked to use our boat to speak to the crowd. I noticed while he talked that shoals of fish surrounded our boat as if they were a herd of sheep. And the people. They came to him hungry, and he fed them—with bread, stories, with himself.”

He looked up at her. “Afterward, he told us to put down the nets, and every fish in the sea rushed to our puny little boat! I had to call James and John and Zebedee to help us. The nets nearly ripped with the weight of that catch!” He wiped a hand across his eyes. “Everything was simple then. He taught people. He loved them. He healed them.”

Martha nodded. “Our first meeting was simple, too. I was in synagogue one Sabbath when he preached. I was thinking about fixing supper, when Miriam gripped my arm and whispered, ‘Listen!’”

“What did he say?” asked Peter.

Martha quoted Isaiah from memory. “‘O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted! I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. . . . Your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the prosperity of your children.’” She said, “I felt the Master speaking to me directly, to all I had lost.”



“What do you mean?” said Peter.

Martha said, “I have borne four children. They all died before they had lived a month.”

Peter stared at her dumbly. How old was she? Twenty-eight?

“Now I am a widow and not likely to marry again, for what man wants to marry a woman whose babies die?” Her mouth curved down a moment. “As we left the synagogue, Jesus stopped before us and asked to come to eat—as if he knew us. Lazarus was put off, but Miriam said yes. The Lord became our friend. And gradually I found a home.”

Peter lifted his eyebrows.

Martha said, “Oh, in one way, it’s nothing new. Our same house in Bethany. But I began to help women with birthing, and to feed the beggars who pass through Bethany on their way to Jerusalem. It may seem a small thing, but it is not. I am—” She paused. “—contented. But I do agree with you. Everything for him is changing.”

Peter shook his head. “It began with the Baptist’s death. Now he talks of seed sown on stony ground; he foretells persecution. He calls the leaders a brood of vipers. Now they watch his every step, waiting for their chance. I am afraid for him.”

“And so you spoke to him today,” she said.

“Yes.”

“My sister and I are also worried. Miriam took one look at him in Magdala and said we had to change our plans, though we’ve had word that Lazarus is ill at home. I’m often impatient with Miriam’s impulses. They’re impractical, I tell her. But this time, she’s right. The Master looks parched inside.”

That was it exactly. With growing respect, Peter looked at her. “But why are you smiling?” he asked.

She stretched her legs in front of her. “For many days, it has been in my mind that this—this storm gathering over him is like something else. I’ve been trying and trying to think what it is. Now I know.”

“What?” said Peter.

“It’s like waiting for a baby to be born.”

Peter stared hard. He saw her lips curve into a sly smile.

“Your eyes will stay crossed if you keep doing that.”

Exasperated, he laughed. “For what are you talking about babies, Martha?”

“No, listen!” she said. “A change is coming. I feel it. Like when a baby is coming to be born.” She clasped her hands together. “I wish husbands could be with their wives when the babies come. Then maybe they’d understand.”

“What’s to understand?” said Peter.

Martha's eyes were intent on the fire. "You wait and wait for that baby. You take joy in it growing inside you. But in the back of your mind, you know you will face agony. And not only that; so many women, so many babies die. You must risk everything."

"You mean," said Peter, "that Jesus is risking this?"

She nodded. "And when the time comes, you work and sweat and plead with the Most High for relief, but there is none. It takes hours, days. You have no control. Your heart seems to break wide open. You surrender." She stopped. When she went on, her voice was softer. "Then you give birth. Light breaks around you. You hold new life in your arms. There's nothing dearer in the world."

"But what if the agony is terrible?" Peter whispered. "What if it's worse than anything you can imagine?"

Martha gazed at him over the fire. "The Master is taking that risk for the sake of what will come. I am his friend. I must be ready to take it with him. Are you?"



As the Gospels tell, a few days later, Peter denied he even knew this man he had loved and followed for three years. Yet Peter's genuine humility saved him. Whenever Peter

sinned, he crawled back to Christ again, confident of Jesus' love. After Pentecost, Peter would become the leader of the new church, and then the first bishop of Rome, though he had to be corrected again and again by God, by the Apostles and Paul.

There is a legend told of Peter in his old age. He leaves Rome, knowing that the Romans plan to kill him. He meets Jesus walking in the other direction. Peter prostrates himself before the Lord and asks where he is going. "To Rome, to be crucified again," comes the reply. At that, Peter turns and goes back to face martyrdom.