

Scolding God

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Reading from the Gospel: Mark 8:27-38

There are only two certain things each and every one of us will ever face in our lives ... two things we all hold in common ... birth and death. Of course, there's a whole lot of other stuff that happens in between ... including taxes ... and there are many other things we probably do share in common throughout our lives.

But the two universal equalizers still remain ... birth and death ... for all of us. There's a big difference between them though. We like talking about births. Just the news of someone becoming pregnant brings a smile to our faces. Jon and Arianne are anxiously awaiting the birth of their first child in just a few days and it will be a glorious event ... an event full of expectation and wonder.

However ... even though we will all die one day ... death isn't an event that's dear to us. It's never a comfortable subject to bring up at a dinner table or party. Seriously ... try this sometime. You're in the middle of group of friends and everyone is laughing and having a great time. Ask this simple question ... "Do you ever think about dying?" I can guarantee the conversation will suddenly grow quiet.

We don't like talking about death ... we will do everything we can to shield our children as well as ourselves from hearing or talking or even thinking about it. Let's keep the focus on living ... focus on life. A lot of money is made in this country because we don't like to consider dying. We will do everything we can to delay the onset of age and God forbid, death!

We will smear every kind of skin cream on our bodies to take away the wrinkles ... we'll try to watch our diets ... we'll even dust off exercise equipment and try to keep in shape ... we'll take all kinds of pills and remedies to ward off the evils of aging ... and medical science has developed so many wonderful machines so that it's possible to keep someone alive long after they should have already been planted in the ground.

But Jesus didn't have the same apprehension about death that we seem to carry around.

Unfortunately, like us, his disciples didn't like talking about it either. And in particular, Peter didn't want Jesus even talking about it so other people could hear him. You won't get a lot of good press if you go around predicting how you're going to die. We want to follow a living Messiah ... not a dead one. We want to experience his miracles ... not watch him hanging from a cross. We want Jesus to make us feel good ... not make us walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

However in our gospel reading this morning ... Jesus is trying to tell his disciples a message they really don't want to hear. Maybe we really don't think we want to hear it either. Listen now to the word of our Lord from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8, verses 27-38. I suspect we'd probably tell Jesus the same thing Peter tells him.

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

30 And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Dead Messiahs make lousy leaders. At least Peter thinks so. Up to this point, Peter thought he'd had it made. He's definitely hooked up with the right Rabbi. Not only does this Jesus say some revolutionary things ... HE'S got the power ... the power to heal ... the lame walk ... the blind see ... the lepers are cleansed.

Of course, this is just the beginning. You've got to start slowly ... build up your base ... add more disciples and followers so that when Jesus turns that power loose on the Roman Army ... oh, man ... watch out.

If Jesus can cast out demons ... he's surely going to cast out this Roman gang. They'll wish they'd never seen the likes of the Jewish people.

That's when Jesus lands a bombshell right at Peter's feet ... and in front of everyone. "Oh, by the way, I'm going to be persecuted, beaten, hung up on a cross to die and then in three days I'll rise from the dead."

"Say again? What was that you said?"

There's a horrific look on Peter's face. I really don't think he even heard the part about rising again ... I think when the image of Jesus hanging from a Roman cross flashed in his head ... he stopped right there. "No, no no! That's not the way it's going to happen."

So Peter ... does the unthinkable. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. A lowly disciple ... a student ... actually takes his rabbi ... his teacher aside and dares to tell him what he will say and not say. That's unheard of ... but I think we've come to expect the unheard of from this disciple. You gotta admire his tenacity.

I think Peter tells him something like this ... "This is not the message I want to hear and I certainly don't want you talking like that in front of the others. There will be no dying on a cross. You're going to kick some Roman butt and that's final."

To quote an old Paul Newman movie ... "What we've got here is a failure to communicate." What Jesus says and what Peter hears are two different things. You see, Peter's definition of a Messiah is the one the Jewish people have dreamed about since the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the people to Babylon.

The Messiah, to Peter and probably the rest of the disciples, was the one who would become a mighty leader ... a general among generals ... who would lead the people in a uprising against their oppressors ... drive them from the country ... and reinstate the Davidic Kingdom once and for all.

However ... that's not Jesus' interpretation of a Messiah. It's not the Roman army Jesus wants to defeat ... it is a far greater enemy ... an enemy much more dangerous ... and that enemy resides in all the people ... that enemy resides in us ... enslaving us to sin ... enslaving us to the rule of law instead of the justice and mercy ... an enemy that oppresses some and rewards others ... an enemy that tells us who is worthy of God's love and who is not worthy ... an enemy that says if you aren't like me ... if you don't believe the way I believe ... if you don't play and love and vote the way I do ... then you don't belong inside with the "good people" ... an enemy that destroys the creation of God instead of mending it.

No ... Jesus came into this world to change the hearts of the people ... Jesus came into this world to experience life as we experience it with all of its pain ... to walk the long dusty paths we walk ... to suffer with those who suffer ... to touch those who were untouchable ... to bring hope to the hopeless ... to show compassion to the forgotten and lonely ... Jesus came into this world and into our hearts to remind us of God's unconditional love and to renew the covenant between God and

us ... and Jesus came into this world to defeat the consequences of sin ... death ... he came to die on a cross and rise again to offer eternal salvation to those who accept him as their Lord and Savior.

This isn't the kind of Messiah Peter was expecting. This isn't the kind of Messiah most of the people standing there that day in the hot sun were expecting. And now ... some 2000 plus years later ... I still don't believe this is the kind of Messiah any of us are expecting either.

Peter's Messiah would be so much better. We still want someone who will take care of every little thing that goes wrong in our lives. We want a Jesus in our pocket we can pull out every time we get in trouble ... a Jesus who will cure us when we get sick ... a Jesus who will make sure we always have enough money in the bank ... a Jesus who will see to it that the right candidate is elected ... a Jesus who will demand to the rest of the world that we're right and their wrong ... a Jesus who will see to it that my spouse does what I tell her to do and that the kids toe the line ... a Jesus who will remind me that it's okay to share with the poor, as long as I don't have to touch them or talk to them or share my room with them ... a Jesus who will protect me and all my worldly possessions from fire, rust and theft ... a Jesus who will worship the way I worship and expect you to do the same, too.

But this Messiah ... this Jesus ... instead tells us that he's going to die on the cross ... and he tells you that you must pick up your cross and follow him. And friends ... we don't want to hear those words. Remember? We don't like words about dying. We don't want to listen to words that tell us that in order for us to gain our lives we must lose our lives.

I certainly don't. But there's a bigger problem if we don't listen and respond to those words. If we don't pick up that cross ... and follow ... and recommit ourselves to Jesus Christ ... then everything we've confessed and prayed and sung in here this morning is ... to quote a certain South Carolina congressman ... a lie.

Maybe we are afraid. Maybe we don't think we can measure up to the role model of Jesus Christ. Well ... to tell you the truth ... you don't worry about that. You never will measure up to Jesus Christ. I know for sure I won't.

But you see ... the gift Christ gave us on the cross means we don't have to actually die on a cross to follow Jesus ... that cross is our reminder of what our Savior has already done for us. Because if you think about it ... all our lives we are actually dying ... but for those whose hope is in Jesus Christ ... death has already been defeated.

For dying is a process ... a journey ... and what we choose to do **along the way** ... by following Jesus Christ ... is to give up a little bit **along the way** ... to lose our lives ... just as Christ told us ... "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

So how do we do that? How do we lose our lives along the way with Christ? For some of us ... that might mean giving up all the creature comforts of this world to follow Jesus into some remote developing country on the other side of the world. But that might not work for all of us.

However, there are many other ways ...

You can give up some of your time by getting up a few minutes earlier every morning to read the Bible or have devotion with your family. Though we are going through difficult financial times ... giving up a few more dollars so that those who have absolutely nothing is making a sacrificial offering.

Did you know that this church is directly responsible for developing two food co-ops at an apartment complex run by the Initiative for Affordable Housing? Bob Reardon will be happy to tell you how you can give up a little time ... lose a little bit of your self ... twice a month to help deliver the food from the Atlanta Food Bank.

Time is always a precious commodity ... but Wendy and the youth are always looking for chaperones who will be willing to put up with a raucous evening for fun and fellowship.

Many people throughout this country are taking mission vacations ... giving up their days at the beach to make a difference to someone else. We have friends of this church who are in jail ... what sacrifice could you make in your life to visit them and let them hear that they are not forgotten and that Christ still loves them.

Here's one I like ... how about giving up some pain in your life by forgiving someone who's hurt you. We're always in need of someone willing to sacrifice some miles on the odometer by picking up church members who might need a ride to church or to a doctor's office.

Are you willing to lose an hour by visiting someone in the hospital ... or one of our homebound members who might be lonely? You could lose some of your day by preparing a Sunday School lesson for our children, youth or even an adult class ... there are plenty of opportunities there.

You could even risk reaching out to someone ... someone who is lost ... someone who is new to your neighborhood ... someone who is sitting next to you at a meeting ... anyone ... and just having the courage to tell them that you worship at a little church here in Decatur, Ga. ... and they are welcome to come and meet us.

These are all just some of those little losses we can have along the way ... they are little ways of dying to Christ. Each one helping to build the Kingdom of our Savior. After all ... Jesus tells us ... to pick up our cross and follow him.

I'd like to close with some powerful words by the late William Sloan Coffin ... listen closely ... you will hear what he believes Jesus Christ was saying that day to Peter and the disciples ... and to us.

“Of course the Church is conservative for it has so much to conserve. But let it conserve a vision of the world's destiny and not the structures of the world's past. Let the church in remembering Christ ... remember that it is conserving the most uprooting, the most revolutionary force in all human history. For it was Christ who crossed every boundary, broke down every barrier. He crossed the boundaries of class by eating with the outcasts. He crossed the boundary of nations

by pointing to a Samaritan as the agent of God's will. He transgressed religious boundaries by claiming the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Everywhere he manifested his freedom and called others to theirs, calling them forth from family, national and religious loyalties ... to loyalty to the world at large. If ever there was a man who trusted his origins and had the courage to emerge from them, it was Christ." (*Credo*, p. 138)

Let us pray:

Called as partners in Christ's service,
called to ministries of grace,
We respond with deep commitment,
fresh new lines of faith to trace.
May we learn the art of sharing,
side by side and friend with friend,
Equal partners in our caring
to fulfill God's chosen end.

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