

Who Am I?

The passage Joetta read this morning from Exodus, where Moses encounters God in the burning bush, is one of the most well-known stories from the Bible. If you get time later today, go back and re-read it, meditate on it, and ask God what it is He's calling you to do – with Him going along with you to do it! If we're being honest, I think we tend to be quite a bit like Moses – you heard him start to make excuses, in an attempt to get out of doing what God had called him to do. If you read on, into Exodus 4, you'll see Moses continues to make excuses to try to get out of doing what he feels is impossible – but for God, it's very possible!

Last week, our Gospel lesson focused on Peter's confession of faith. He recognized that Jesus was the Messiah – the Christ – and the Son of God. Jesus gives Simon, son of Jonah, the nickname, "Peter," the transliteration of the Greek word for "the Rock," and says He will build His church on it. So Simon Peter, as we usually call him, becomes one of the inner circle of disciples who follow Jesus. Today we're going to back into Matthew's gospel, to read the rest of the 16th chapter. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 16:21-28. **Read Matthew 16:21-28.**

You know, we don't know how much time passed between Peter's confession of faith, and verse 21. What Matthew records though, is that Jesus is trying to get them ready for what's coming down the pike. "From that time on, Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised," (Matt. 16:21). Can you imagine what must have went through the minds of Peter and the other apostles?

Get Behind Me Satan

I suspect some of them may have doubted what Jesus had said. Maybe they started to rethink what they thought of Him. People had said Jesus was crazy – I wonder if the thought crossed their minds in the moment when they first heard all this. Peter "the Rock" goes from being rock solid, to being a stumbling block. "And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must not happen to You,'" (verse 22). I can relate to what Peter's going through here. He's seen Jesus do some pretty amazing stuff, and knows He's God in human skin. All Jesus has to do is snap His fingers, and the whole world would be set right.

Peter probably wondered, "What kind of justice and vindication would Jesus bring to Israel by dying?" It would be like someone running for the combined office of President of the United States, and leader of the whole Christian world on a platform of, "Elect me, and I promise to be assassinated!" I understand why Peter reacted the

way he did – but wow, check out the reaction from Jesus! “But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,’” (verse 23).

“Get behind Me, Satan!” It’s the strongest rebuke Jesus uses in the Gospels. He uses it on the one on whom He’s just bestowed the ultimate compliment and to whom He has promised the greatest of power on earth – the power to bind and loose sins. This is the interesting twist that makes us so much like Peter. We want Jesus to fit in a box we make for Him, rather than we being changed ourselves. It’s the same thing the tempter, Satan, does, way back in Matthew 4, when he takes Jesus to the top of the mountain, “and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to Him, ‘All these I will give You, if You will fall down and worship me,’” (Matt. 4:8-9). The devil’s life’s work is to put the easy way in front of us so that we would turn from the work the good Lord’s given us to do, and seek worldly fame and glory instead.

Come With Me

This is precisely what Peter did to Jesus. He tempted Him to abandon the hard road the Father had given Him to travel, and take the easy way out. So often we fall into the same trap! Like Peter, we know Jesus Christ is the Messiah, but we tend to deny that fact when it’s easier or more enticing to follow the wide, well-paved road. The old tempter tells us things through mass media every day: he who has the most toys wins; there’s no such thing as being too rich; if you have enough plastic surgeries, you’ll be beautiful and happy; you can’t live without the newest, greatest, latest of everything. All of these, of course are just different ways of saying that our destinies are in our own hands and we can ensure our own happiness and well-being by working harder, earning more, getting more power and prestige, and caring most deeply about our appearance. Can you see the idols of Self and Selfishness in your life? If you do, tell them, “Get behind me, Satan!” Those things are the same temptations Jesus was offered in the desert, just in more modern terms.

Every time Jesus was tempted, He looked within – where He knew the Holy Spirit resided – and drew the strength to resist temptation and continue on the mission our Father had given Him. The temptation in today’s Gospel account must have been nearly irresistible – Jesus, knowing He’s fully God and fully human, with the awesome power and ability to make all things right with a snap of His fingers – instead responds with a call to discipleship the likes of which the world had never seen. “Then Jesus told His disciples, ‘If any wish to come after Me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake will find it,’” (Matt. 16:24-25). Jesus’ call to discipleship – the call to lay down our very lives and pick up our crosses is the exact opposite of what Peter has tempted Jesus with.

“Come with Me, and suffer for the sake of the Kingdom, there you will find your life.” Or, as the late Christian writer, evangelist, and teacher Oswald Chambers put it, “There is actually only one thing you can dedicate to God, and that is your right to yourself. If you give God your right to yourself, He will make a holy experiment out of you – and His experiments always succeed.”¹ That’s a calling that a lot of people in America, who claim to be Christian in 2023 don’t want to hear. They would prefer to have a United States flag-wrapped Savior Jesus, rather than having the Christ of the cross and empty tomb telling them to be changed by letting Him be Lord over them.

Take Up The Cross

“For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” Jesus asks (Matt. 16:26). Some versions read, “What will it profit someone if they gain the whole world, yet lose their soul? Or what can someone give in exchange for their soul?” Jesus goes on to talk about the second coming. He says, “For the Son of Man is to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom,” (verses 27-28).

I know that last verse seems puzzling. It must have been perplexing to the apostles when they heard it. All of them eventually died. But since then, the Scriptures were written down, and have added meaning which Matthew couldn’t have possibly imagined. I think that when Jesus says, “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom,” in verse 28, He said it with us – and the future church in mind. It’s a good word for our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren – that if we nurture them in the faith, at some point, in God’s perfect timing, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.”² What Jesus wants is for us to begin denying the temptations of the world – just like He did. He expects us to put the message of the Gospel first in our lives. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that message. He wants us to focus first on loving God and neighbors, and lower our focus on how much glory, and how many possessions we have in this world. If we focus first about living out the Great Commandment, which is to love God and others; and fulfill the Great Commission, which is to go into the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – and guide people to Him because we are living examples of Christ, we’ll have less time on our hands to be tempted in the first place.

And, when we are, we’ll be well-armed, for whatever spiritual battles come up against us. What I’m trying to express here is that we have to practice sacrificial living.

¹ Oswald Chambers, *Utmost: Classic Readings and Prayers from Oswald Chambers*. Discovery House Publishers: Grand Rapids, 2013. p. 58.

² *The United Methodist Hymnal*, The Nicene Creed. United Methodist Publishing: Nashville, 1989. p. 880.

Each of us needs to look and see where Jesus is calling us to sacrifice in order to pick up and carry our crosses. Whatever is most important in our lives is the thing Jesus calls us to sacrifice. If money is a worry you focus on – that’s what you need to sacrifice. If you’re a workaholic – He’s calling you to sacrifice your time. Whatever you put first in your life is the thing Jesus calls you to put down – to sacrifice – so that you’re ready and able to take up your cross and follow Him to the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus is the Christ, but His arrival doesn’t mean what we might think. It doesn’t mean that everything is peachy keen for His believers, and we’ll all be put on pedestals because we know Jesus. His arrival in our lives means we now know what the most important thing in our life is – Him – and we have to put everything else in its proper place if we are going to follow Him.

We’re called to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” We can’t hope to be perfect as Christ was perfect. He was fully God and fully man, and we are ordinary human beings. But we can hope to be faithful to God’s call, like Moses was. Like Peter was. Sometimes we’ll get it right, and sometimes we’ll get it wrong. In every situation we must always try our best to get our priorities right – to take up the cross and go out into the world.

Prayer: God of our ancestors, as we gather to break the bread, we remember that through the blood of the Lamb You redeemed us and made us pass over from death to new life. Grant that, as we celebrate Your mighty deeds, we may be one with Christ in offering ourselves to You as living sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise. Amen.