

Peter's Paradox  
Mark 8:31-38  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached March 8, 2009 at San José, Costa Rica

Let's just call it Peter's Paradox. How can you talk about life and death in the same breath? How can you offer hope and despair from the same glorious mouth? How can you call out your most faithful supporter as your worst enemy? These may have been some the thoughts of the chastened Peter as he stood there hearing perhaps the most challenging message Jesus ever offered: "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."

Poor Peter becomes the object lesson of this great paradox of the Christian life simply because he has been listening and watching carefully. He has heard Jesus preach words of life, and even bring back from the dead a little girl with the words "Talitha cum," and he has seen five thousand people, and then four thousand more, eat from what was just barely enough food for just the twelve disciples. He has seen the blind healed and the faith of unclean Gentiles affirmed. He has even answered correctly what he probably thinks is the hardest question on the final exam: "Who do you say that I am?" by affirming Jesus as the Messiah. And then, the next thing he knows, he is looking at the ground, his face flushed with shame, for Jesus has humiliated him in front of his peers for simply affirming everything he has just heard and seen. Mark tells us very specifically that Jesus "turned and

looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter, saying ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ ” This was no private chiding to get with the program. It was an in-your-face, public kind of scolding that must have made Peter feel about six years old. If Jesus wanted him to receive the kingdom of God like a child, this was a rough way to go about it.

But that is all part of the paradox, isn't it? To mature in the faith, we must be like children. To be great, we must be humbled. To gain everything, we must give everything away. And to live we must die. All these are sayings of this same paradoxical and contradictory Jesus. God never claimed to be 100% logical. Creating order from chaos? Sure. Bending the laws of nature? Sure. But logical, not necessarily. Perhaps the ancients were more comfortable with being tossed about intellectually by their gods, not being, as we are, products of the age of enlightenment where order and predictability are our gods' most redeeming virtues. Perhaps truth has a different ring in the Internet age than in the stone age. But students are students and learning that what you think you just learned well is wrong can be a little earth shattering. And so our hearts go out to Peter as his beloved teacher lets him have it in some of the harshest words in all of the Gospels, and we hope not to hear similar such words when we come face to face with our Savior in the kingdom of heaven.

I mentioned last week that we would be exploring during Lent some of the ways Scripture speaks about the vision God has given us at ECF, the vision of “A

world of travelers, safely home.” And last week, I talked about Noah, and the way God keeps God’s promises, of how there is always dry land on which we may once again plant our feet after being on a journey, after being in a transitional place, as Noah and his family were for so many months, as we are during Lent, journeying toward the homecoming of Easter morning. I talked about the New Jerusalem at the end of time, and its promise of peace and healing, its streets of gold and its river of life. We will once again find ourselves in a place in which we know the deepest intimacy with our God, and where we need not struggle just to survive. We will be home, safely home, in the presence of a loving and gracious God, just like the Prodigal son in the arms of his father, forgiven for our debts, our trespasses, our sins, the wasting of our lives on the things that do not last. The meek shall inherit the earth, and those who mourn shall be comforted. The lion will lie down with the lamb, and there will not be a sword or spear to be found, but only plowshares and pruning hooks. That is when we will know we are safely home, right? What a beautiful vision! Can I get an “Amen”?

Amen? Amen did you say? Hardly. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Not my words, but Jesus’ words. “If any of you want to become my followers, 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” And so here we are, face to face once again with Peter’s

paradox, as he too tried to reconcile Jesus' message of life, with Jesus' prophecy of death. How do we reconcile a vision of a world of God's travelers safely home with the call to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel? How do we put together the Biblical visions of walking down the streets of gold in the New Jerusalem and the dusty, Lenten road to Calvary? How do we proclaim life even as we march toward death? And if the vision of "safely home" is an image of suffering, of us hanging on the cross, or even just carrying it, why on earth would anyone want to join us?

Well, the easy way out of this paradox is to compartmentalize our life into the here and now, and our life in the hereafter, on earth and in heaven. In our handful of years, we are called to endure the taunts, torture, persecution and even death that come with our faith, knowing that our true home awaits us for the rest of eternity. The image of being "safely home" in heaven makes our years of suffering bearable, and we can take some solace in knowing that our mortal bodies will not last forever, and that we will inherit an imperishable body in a place where things are not so brutal. That hope keeps people going, like a marathon runner who sees the finish line ahead. The only problem with this way of dealing with the paradox is that it doesn't really mesh too well with a lot of the New Testament, where we see Jesus healing and feeding, alleviating suffering, and bringing life. It doesn't square very well with God's call to justice from the prophets in the Old Testament, the Amoses and Isaiahs who called for the wicked to repent so that the poor might

thrive and not just survive. No, I think the Bible is too clear that the life God has given us is one to be enjoyed to make it an endurance test for the kingdom of heaven.

Indeed, Jesus' own words in tonight's passage make that clear when we take a look at what they meant in Greek, and in context. When we hear Jesus say, "If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves," we generally think sacrificing ourselves for others, for putting ourselves last, and thinking better of others than ourselves. The word humility comes to mind, and so like the stereotypical parent who sacrifices everything for the sake of his or her child, working night and day to make sure that child's future is assured, we understand ourselves called to live for others at the expense of our own identities. Now, while serving others is indeed a Christian virtue, utter self-sacrifice is not exactly what Jesus had in mind when he called his followers to deny themselves. In fact, what he is doing is calling them to deny their family and culture for the sake of the Gospel rather than to deny themselves. Yes, he is calling them to put their earthly ties of kinship and citizenship second to their faith in God. What they must deny is the comfort of their roles and responsibilities, their daily routines, the privileges and benefits accrued to them by virtue of birth or position in society. Peter is called Satan when he asks Jesus to turn his back on God's purposes by remaining with the disciples, remaining their earthly leader. Remember that Peter rebukes Jesus for saying he must die, something Peter cannot contemplate, an earthy thought, rather

than a divine thought. And so a better way to translate that verse then is to say that “Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must leave everything behind and commit themselves wholly to my purposes,” even to the point of the persecution and death represented by Jesus telling them to “take up their cross.” Unless our self-sacrifice is for God’s purposes, it is merely a waste of the life given to us by God. Unless our self-sacrifice is for God’s purposes, it is merely a waste of the life given to us by God.

I say this hoping you will not think I am saying that a parent’s sacrifice for a child, or a soldier’s for a nation, or a teacher’s for a student, is a waste of the life given to us by God. Far from it. What I am saying is that if these sacrifices are made at the expense of God’s purposes, to satisfy our own needs rather than God’s needs, or to serve a nation’s interests rather than God’s interests, then we are in line to hear the rebuke Peter heard. What was it Jesus said when told his family was asking for him outside the house in which he was teaching? “Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ ” If it seems like I am picking on family, it is not to say that family is unimportant, but to point up something more important about both the kingdom, and the notion of “A world of travelers, safely home,” namely the paradoxical nature of God’s home for us, that it may not in fact be in the place, or in the form we expect it to be.

There are a lot of ways, biblical ways, to understand the idea of arriving safely home, and we will explore others in upcoming weeks. Tonight, I want to suggest to you that one of those ways is as someone who has found their place in God's purposes, who has arrived at that place where they are comfortable without a permanent home, following Christ even if it means persecution, someone who understands a little more keenly what Jesus means when he says "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" and who understand that call as truly arriving safely home. For those to whom God is calling to that understanding, our job as a church is help them get to that home using the gifts God has given us.

I'd like to conclude tonight with a prayer that I think captures something of the paradoxical nature of arriving safely home in the way Jesus defines it in our passage from Mark. It is called, "No Dying Today," by John van de Laar, a white South African Methodist pastor, and it goes like this:

You keep talking about dying, Jesus;  
About how life is found  
    not by white-knuckled clinging;  
    but by a prodigal losing.

We nod and smile, and ponder the deep significance of these words,  
and then, with a slow sigh of relief,  
we go back to our life-preservers;  
our safe, protected worlds;  
our well-sheltered, comfortable spirituality;  
and we turn our eyes away from those who reach out to us,  
those we could touch with Your life,  
if only we would take the risk.

What were you thinking, Jesus?  
Surely faith is about finding life,  
not laying it down?  
Surely we need to follow You in order to be sure  
that life doesn't end when we die?  
There'll be no dying today, Jesus – not if we can help it.  
And if your promise is to be believed;  
no dying at all – ever.

If only we could keep away the images of those others,  
the different, the lonely, the misunderstood, and the forgotten,  
the hungry, the abused, the least;  
the ones in whose eyes we glimpse, in unguarded moments,  
the outline of Your face;  
the ones in whose silence we hear a sound,  
not unlike Your voice,  
inviting us to carry a cross.

May God help each of us travelers to arrive safely home, and help one another  
along the way. Amen.