

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2018

Jesus and Satan were having an ongoing argument about who was better on his computer. They had been going at it for days, and God was tired of hearing all of the bickering.

Finally God said, "Cool it. I am going to set up a test that will run two hours and I will judge who does the better job."

So Satan and Jesus sat down at the keyboards and typed away. They moused. They did spreadsheets. They wrote reports. They sent faxes. They sent e-mail. They sent out e-mail with attachments. They downloaded. They did some genealogy reports. They made cards. They did every known job. But ten minutes before their time was up, lightning suddenly flashed across the sky, thunder rolled, the rain poured and, of course, the electricity went off.

Satan stared at his blank screen and screamed every curse word known in the underworld. Jesus just sighed. The electricity finally flickered back on and each of them restarted their computers.

Satan started searching frantically, screaming "It's gone! It's all gone! I lost everything when the power went out!"

Meanwhile, Jesus quietly started printing out all of his files from the past two hours. Satan observed this and became irate.

"Wait! He cheated, how did he do it?"

God shrugged and said, "Jesus saves."

I know some of you will appreciate that little bit of humor more than others, especially those of you who have lost things on their computer or had them messed up lately. In a whole different way, it's a reminder that the works of Satan corrupt; even high-tech computers and high-tekkies are not safe when the electricity goes out. One could build a whole sermon just around the nature of what good back-up means and can offer those who are lost and suffering....

Today's Gospel lesson is not about the devil, other than he is in the details, perhaps. We find ourselves in Chapter 8, which is disconcerting because we were in Chapter 9 as we left Epiphany, so once again we are back-tracking in the story line. It's a shocking exchange, because for more than eight chapters Jesus has told everyone he sees and who sees his good works to ignore their connection to being the Messiah, the Chosen One, the Son of Man. Here in this chapter, he gives his disciples the bombshell news that he is the one all of Israel has been

imagining and waiting for, and that he must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He relates this news quite plainly, as if it were nothing special, nothing to be concerned about. So Peter takes him aside and begins to chastise him, probably with words like, "Come on now! We don't want to hear this again" or "let's not overstate what's happening," etc. Or perhaps it was more like "'We have seen what power you have and thought you would free us from the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel to its previous glory.'" Jesus responds that such an opinion is a 'human' way of thinking. It's what we all would have thought had we been among those first disciples."ⁱ And then Jesus not only rebukes Peter, but warns the disciples that what is bound to happen to him is in their future also. Hence, the ultimate cost of discipleship. Mark believes that God has things planned for Jesus, for those around him, for those who follow him. They were certainly all aware of the Scripture from Isaiah that stated "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9). Yet they must have been really shocked when he revealed to them what he planned to do and how he believed the religious and political authorities around him would respond.

Of course, this leads into the next section and discussion of whether those who heard the word and followed Jesus would be able to take on the cross, as did he, and whether they were ready to die the death he would die. (Quite a few of the original 12 did, as did other apostles, that is, ones sent out by Jesus to preach the good news at the time of Pentecost.) It is written for us, and by extension preached to us, asking could we, are we willing to do the same? Can we take on the cross of Jesus? I'm not sure that has a lot of meaning for us in the first-world United States of America. Most of us, unless we are soldiers sent overseas perhaps, will ever have to choose between life and belief in Jesus. Some Americans, including Dr. King and the freedom riders, learned the hard way that their faith would not save them, and that in fact it would bring them face to face with the kind of death Jesus was speaking about. Yet for the majority of us, taking on the cross will rarely, if ever, have the same kind of meaning as it did in Jesus' day or in Dr. King's circle. This is not to forget the oft times good work of missionaries who sincerely believed that the work they were doing was crucial (no pun intended) and what God and the church and their own faith demanded of them. Yet missionary work is a special calling, and most of us are not called specially. But we are called specifically to examine our lives, and to see in what way we can participate in bringing the good news of God in Christ to the world about us. For most folks, that will not involve an encounter with God, not an encounter with Jesus, nor an encounter with the cross. The crossroads most of us are likely to see and experience are the daily deaths and resurrections that come in believing and acting out our Christ-given and renewed lives.

What do I mean by that? I think that many folks in this congregation have lived through the pains and challenges of death in a myriad of ways during their daily forays into this most difficult of worlds. Losing a loved one, being let go from a job, feeling shunned because of one's lifestyle or due to the expression of one's heartfelt beliefs are all mini-deaths from which we struggle to recover. In his deeply moving book *True Resurrection*, the British author and theologian H. A. Williams writes about his experience of the ultimate Christian triumph, the divine transformation of despair into glory, of bankruptcy into limitless riches, of true wilderness and true resurrection.ⁱⁱ And he sees this take place in the every day, each time we recover from what life hands us, which is not often an easy task to master. I remember being turned down by the ministries commission in the Diocese of Maryland when I first sought to exercise my call to the ordained ministry. I was so sure God had called me to this way of life and it was my job to convince the group of people gathered for a discernment weekend that I was ready for the work I was seeking to do. But I did not make it through the process. I was too young, they said; I needed more experience; I could not adequately articulate my call. I was young (indeed I was 20); how could I get more experience if they did not allow me to continue, I complained; and finally how do you learn to speak the vocabulary the group wants to hear unless you're already part of the group? I was devastated. It felt as though I was dying, what with the rejection and feeling now completely lost. I had put all my eggs into this one basket; now what was I to do? It took me nearly four years to recover. A new city, a different diocese, a group of supportive friends who knew how to work within diocesan confines and who taught me how to speak with confidence, and there I was on a different track. I learned later that the commission in Maryland had intentionally turned me down to see how I might as a more mature human being deal with rejection. Yet for me it was like coming out of a dark tunnel, a true resurrection into a life I had never even imagined. It was good, it was fulfilling, it was a completion - - thank God for small miracles. I was taking up the cross but in a different way. It did not mean certain death, but there were life-changing challenges, ever so important decisions to be made, things to do I had never considered, efforts to be made on behalf of others that would take entire portions of my life away and from which I would never recover. It makes me wonder what those who heard Jesus' admonition to take up the cross and follow him must have thought. Did they think it was an easy thing with only a quick response needed? Did they realize how serious he was, so much so that they decided to stop following him, saying "this is too hard!?" Were they willing to give up their lives, literally, for what he/they believed in, risking it all for the sake of the cause of the kingdom?

I'm thinking that it's not unusual to learn that the disciples did not understand what Jesus told them until after it all happened. Even then, they were stunned. When he encountered them in John Mark's upper room soon after the resurrection, they had been in hiding. They weren't motivated to move on with their lives or to go out and proclaim the word. They were depressed and stuck, frightened and unsure what their next move was to be. Even Jesus'

appearance made no difference. That is why the Spirit had to enter the room and replant them, reenergize them into newness of life because they had not understood even their original call and what it meant. They needed more than a hand - - they needed a push - - or in some cases to be dragged from where they were standing or sitting and sent out, violently maneuvered back into the world. It must have been some incredibly forceful scene to get everyone on the same page and willing to say “yes” to the question “will you follow me?” The temptation to do nothing was, and is, great.

I’m reminded of the story of the four priests who were spending a couple of days at a cabin. In the evening they decided to tell each other their biggest temptation.

The first priest said, "Well, it's kind of embarrassing, but my big temptation is bad pictures. Once I even bought a copy of the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Edition."

"My temptation is worse," said the second priest. "It's gambling. One Saturday instead of preparing my homily I went to the race track to bet on the ponies."

"Mine is worse still," said the third priest. "I sometimes can't control the urge to drink. One time I actually broke into the sacramental wine."

The fourth priest was quiet. "Brothers, I hate to say this," he said, finally, "but my temptation is worst of all. I have a terrible penchant for gossip – so if you’ll excuse me, I'd got a few phone calls to make!"ⁱⁱⁱ

These are rather silly temptations, and they only bark at the main temptation of today’s story, which is that we too often do not take our call seriously. Have we asked ourselves today, or for that matter, have we asked ourselves lately, if we are doing what the Christ would have us do? Are we open to the workings of the Spirit within us? Can we call Jesus the Son of man and have it mean something to us?

The preacher and teacher Sarah Henrich writes that “The struggle of the disciples to make a good confession of who Jesus will be is the thread that makes *Mark* the edgy narrative it is. It is also a thread in our own lives.”^{iv} So let us exclaim, “Maranatha!” Come, Lord Jesus, and deign to be our guest, and keep us ever mindful of the needs of others, so that they too may become whole, as we are working to be ourselves. Therefore lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil. For the breaking in of your kingdom is what we pray and hope for.

Amen.

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ⁱ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2316

ⁱⁱ <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/true-resurrection-9780826449436/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.stmaryvalleybloom.org/homilyfor1stlent-a.html>

^{iv} http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=255