

Isaiah 51:1-4

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples.

Matthew 16:13-26

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any 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 will find it. 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?”

“Stronger than Death”

When our son, Nate, was three, he seemed eager for the world beyond our apartment, and so we signed him up for a wonderful preschool program at a Presbyterian church several miles from where we lived. I was pleased by what I saw in the classroom. I was drawn to the kind and energetic teachers. I was sure he would thrive in this place, so I happily anticipated the start of his school-year. . . . At least I did until I went through the registration forms that I had brought home to complete.

We were living in a region of California known to be at risk for earthquakes, and so the school asked that parents prepare an earthquake kit for each child. They requested that we plan for a separation that might last three days. In addition to clothes, a blanket, and his favorite non-perishable foods, we were asked to include a photograph of our family, and a letter that might be read to Nate in our absence.

It was the hardest letter I had ever written. I struggled to imagine such a catastrophic future, and then, to address it in a letter to this gregarious little boy who always was willing to let me go because he was so confident of my return.

How could I anticipate the fears and questions of a three year old?

What explanations could I offer for a world suddenly turned dangerous and unpredictable?

How could words on a page possibly comfort him without the sound of my voice, the warmth of my skin, the familiar fragrance and textures of home? What words could possibly suffice?

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Remembering that day is as close as I can come to imagining the task that lay before Jesus in today’s passage. Though the disciples are not children, Jesus is trying to prepare them for a future that is too horrifying for them to imagine. This is the first of three times in Matthew’s gospel that Jesus will try to talk to his followers about the death that waits for him in Jerusalem.

He begins the conversation with a pair of questions. He wants his followers to name who he is to them. He *sets the stage* by asking what others have to say, but then gets to what he really wants to discuss: “*And who do you say that I am?*” The “you” here is plural—Jesus wants to know what his band of followers collectively believe. He wants to hear what they have to say about him.

They need to talk about this, because if Jesus is only a provocative teacher, a sterling example, or a challenging prophet—then his death will mark the end of their relationship.

But in a moment of grace-filled insight, Peter is able to respond “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” The whole gathering must have hushed in wonder—for what Peter says will be the bedrock of that little community’s fledgling faith. It remains today the foundation of the church’s hope and power and life. *Sisters and brothers, what it means for us to be the church* hinges quite directly on *what we believe it means for Jesus to be the Christ*.

If the Living God’s power flows in Jesus—if Jesus is the one sent to set in motion the healing of creation, then something stronger than death is at work in the world. If this is true, then none of us need to be afraid anymore. But that’s a lot to take in—then and now.

So Jesus gets more specific. He tries to demonstrate that going to Jerusalem is necessary, even though he is going to suffer there at the hands of his own religious leaders. He becomes even more explicit, saying that he will be killed—and on the third day raised—but my guess is that his friends aren’t listening very well by the end of the speech—for what he describes is an unimaginable future, at odds with everything his followers understand a Messiah to be. A messiah was supposed to inaugurate the reign of God on earth now. Surely that meant that their political enemies would be vanquished, that their fortunes would be restored, that all kinds of nice things would happen...

Peter can stand only so much before he utters a spontaneous prayer, “God, forbid it—This must never happen to you.”

And can we blame him? What faithful follower would stand by a leader who announces that he is willingly heading toward a brutal death, if that same follower also believed that his leader’s plans would end all hope for the community’s future?

However well-intentioned it is, Jesus can't let Peter's protest stand. It's too much like the temptation Jesus felt in the wilderness just after his baptism—the temptation to be a Messiah who would be above pain and human loss. Jesus chose another way, and he won't be tempted into going back now.

Friends, the world's teaches us to avoid our own death at all costs—no matter how much violence or deprivation is inflicted upon others in the process—but Jesus refuses to live that way. He understands that there are things worse than death. And he understands that there is a force at work in the world that is stronger even than death. Avoiding death will not be the organizing principle of Jesus' life.

Jesus knows that if we spend our lives trying to secure our own futures, we will end up isolated—cut off from what matters most to God. If on the other hand, we open our lives to the larger purposes God might bring about through us, if we keep letting go of the fear the world instills in us, we have the chance to discover freedom and joy and a purpose we could never have imagined.

So Jesus issues an invitation. He says that all of us who want to follow in his footsteps will have to look past our own immediate concerns. We'll need to watch, expectantly, for what God already is doing in the world and come join *that* party. Jesus isn't teaching a noble principle about self-sacrifice that will result in greater human happiness; Jesus is inviting us into a holy relationship—a relationship that may cost us everything, but will make us burn brightly with life.

When Jesus asks “Who do you say that I am?” he is not asking because he needs his ego stroked. He's not asking because he wants us to know the right answer in case we have to take a test. He's asking because he wants the same life that flows through him also to flow through us—he wants to share his breath with us.

When he asks “Who do you say that I am?”—he's inviting us to risk believing that the world need not be defined by the fear of death. He wants us to know that there is a love stronger than the grave. A love we can know right now—a love that is a taste of heaven on earth.

Sometimes we're given a powerful experience of that love. When that happens, we can't keep it to ourselves.

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I visited with AT Brown at Highland Farms this week, where he told me a story that he has shared previously with some of you. He gave me permission to share it again today.

As he reflected on his life he paused and then said, “I’m not afraid to die. I’ve already died once. Have you heard that story?”

Here’s what happened: As a boy of eleven, A.T. and two other friends made their way to the town sand pit.

They wanted a clubhouse, so they decided they would dig out a cave in the pit. They didn’t have much in the way of tools, but they made good progress for a while. AT was deep in the sand, carving out the entrance, when, all at once, six feet of sand collapsed on his back, forcing his head between his knees. He said he’s never felt such pain. His friends tried to dig him out, but they knew they weren’t making headway, so they took off in different directions looking for help.

One found his dad, the other a maintenance worker with a real spade. But by the time the men reached A.T., and dug down to where he was, and pulled his body from the sand, the only words that could be spoken to his mother were, “I believe this boy is gone.” They could find no signs of life. But the adults picked him up, and held him, and drove to the hospital anyway.

AT says that as he lay doubled up underground, so afraid and in such pain, he realized that he was dying. Images of his life passed before his eyes, and then the most remarkable thing happened: he was enveloped by the deepest sense of peace that he can imagine anyone ever feeling. All the pain went away. That peace was the last thing A.T. remembers. He still carries some of that peace with him today.

About an hour and a half after he was pulled from the sand, A.T. opened his eyes in the hospital and asked “Is this heaven?”

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It’s a remarkable story, but it doesn’t feel complete somehow without sharing another thing that A.T. said—because that sandy grave isn’t just a memory for A.T. It changed the way he lived from that day forward.

A.T. told me “When Doris and I look back over our lives—we feel *such blessing, such gratitude*—but that’s not all—when we look back over our lives, and think about the things we’ve done and the choices we’ve made, and whether we served our Lord in the ways that we were supposed to, we can both say *yes, our lives counted, they counted.*”

A few of us here today can attest quite personally that A.T. and Doris’ lives have counted—and continue to count—because we were privileged to be campers at Cedarkirk—the camp that A.T. and Doris founded on the Alafia River in Florida. There we learned to serve meals family style, to wash the sand off each other’s feet at night by the river, to pray and study and laugh and dance—there we had a taste of the welcome we all will know someday.

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Jesus asked his friends, “Who do you say that I am?” Sisters and brothers, how we answer that question matters.

I don’t know about you, but so many days I live as though Jesus *were* just a prophet, a really good man, a teacher whose lessons I didn’t grasp very well. So many days I act as though, in reality, my world is defined by my own little efforts, my too quick judgments, my instinctive fear.

And then one of you reminds me not to give up on the person who has struggled for years with addiction; one of you tells me a story; or prays the prayer I can’t articulate; or shows up with answer I haven’t been able to summon—and then I know again that we worship a God who lives, a God who is still mysteriously about the work of creating and redeeming and sustaining the world

—a God who came to walk the world in the person of Jesus, and has entrusted the church with continuing that journey, giving us to each other in the process

—a God whose love is stronger than death

— a God who is slowly rooting out the fear out of our lives so that we might live.

Thanks be to God for the gift of life we have to share with the world—