

But It Shall Not Be So Among You

Sermon on Mark 10.32–45 for Lent 5B on March 17, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Two Fridays ago, after picking up our children from school, I started driving home from Mount Olive Christian Day School. We were almost there when a pickup truck started backing out of a driveway right into the street where we were. Apparently, this person had somewhere to be because it happened fast. I honked. He kept coming. I swerved. He barely missed us. Our hearts were pumping. Our palms were sweating. Our mouths were gaping. I don't think he ever saw us. I went into dad mode. I started calmly telling my children about something called "the right of way." It seems like most days provide way too many examples of drivers not understanding or not abiding by "the right of way." In other words, that whole thing should never have happened. To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

But that's nothing. This past Friday, our church organist, Noren, went to the movies. He told me he's there a lot. The security guards know him by name. In the middle of the movie, Noren left because a group of young people were being very disruptive. But when Noren left, one of the young women followed him out and pushed him down a flight of stairs. He broke his cheek bone in the three places and his jawbone in another. He had a procedure yesterday to have a metal plate installed behind his cheek bones. When I visited him at Froedtert yesterday, he told me to tell you that this will not stop him and he that hopes to be back with us as soon as possible. But that whole thing should never have happened. To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

Why tell those stories? They are examples, one insignificant, one very significant of the way that the world is not right, the way people are not right, the way people do not act the right way or do the right things. All of us daily experience in some way or another the distance between how the world should be and how the world is. People should not be like bulldozers, but they throw their weight around and steamroll the world anyway. People should care about others enough to know and abide by "the right of way," but it's "my way or the highway." People should be at least aware of other people if not courteous and considerate, but instead they are loud, forceful, rude, belligerent, and even violent. To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

But it is so. This is our daily experience. There is the way things should be. And then there this is the way things are. There's nothing new on the news. It's the same old story. People don't do what they're supposed to do. There's nothing new in your family. It's the same old arguments, the same old attitudes, and the same old actions all the time. It feels hopeless. It will never change until the Last Day. St. Peter writes, "*But according to [God's] promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*" (2 Pet. 3.13). Life in the world to come. Can't wait. Things will work the right way. People will act the right way. Bring it on, Lord! Until then, it is what it is.

But there is a real danger in that attitude. There is a real danger in the assumption that people do not change or cannot change. If people do not change, than I do not have to change, either. Notice that so far in this sermon we have managed to keep the problem out there with them. We have not yet dealt with the problem in here with us, with me, with you. And we don't really want to. When we look at the world and say, "It just is what it is," it leads us to add, "And I am what I am and you're just going to have to live with it." To paraphrase Jesus, "But it should not be so among you."

Jesus used that phrase when He dealt with His disciples in the Gospel Lesson for today. They were on the road to Jerusalem and Jesus was walking ahead of them. They were actually dragging behind. They were afraid. Why? Jesus had told them what would happen: *"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise"* (Mark 10.33–34). The first time Jesus said that, Peter tried to stop Him. It should not be so, Jesus. But this time, it's almost like no one even heard Him. James and John seem to ignore His words and say, *"Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."* And he said to them, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* And they said to him, *"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory"* (Mark 10.35–37). As true man, tempted in every way we are, but without sin, Jesus certainly had to deal with the distance between how things should be and how things are. Jesus certainly had to fight the attitude that His disciples are never going to change.

Do you ever think Jesus has to fight that attitude with you? You hear Him speaking week in and week out but then you pray to Him as if He has said nothing. You hear about His love for you week in and week out but then you walk out there into the world and act like everyone else, pushing and shoving your way around. You know you have habits and attitudes that are out of step with the Spirit, but will you ever change them? We can point out the distance between the way things should be and the way things are in the world all we want, but when will you let the Lord point out that distance in you? You are not who you should be. You are more like the world than you are like Jesus. You have made your own way rather than following God's right way laid out quite clearly in the Ten Commandments and summarized by Jesus, *"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,"* and *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mark 12:30–31). Will you ever change? Will you ever get it right?

Jesus is very patient with His disciples in Mark chapter ten and Jesus is very patient with you. In our text, Jesus points out the difference between the way things are and the way things should be in order to point His disciples to Himself. *"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10.42–45).

In other words, Jesus is different. Instead of waiting for the world to get it right, instead of being frustrated that people don't understand something as simple as "the right of way," instead of demanding that His disciples change, Jesus simply shows them how He is different and He calls them to be like Him. Yes, the world is not what it should be, but Jesus serves it anyway and gives His life as a ransom for it. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, *"And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him"* (Heb. 5.9). Jesus is different, the way people were made to be, but even more. Not only does He obey the rules and live the right way, but He even lets His enemies murder Him and prays for their forgiveness. Why? To rescue us from this world and its inability to change; to rescue us from ourselves and our unwillingness to change.

But then, after pointing to Himself and the difference between Him and the world, Jesus calls His disciples, He calls you, to become like Him. He not only comes to serve us. That is the main thing. But He also comes to change us. What does He tell His disciples about power moves? That might be the way of the world, *"But it shall not be so among you."* He does not say "should not" but "shall not." Do not hear that only as a command that you must obey. Receive it as a bestowal, an enactment, a gift. By His Word and Spirit, Jesus makes you different than the world.

And this is exactly what Jeremiah prophesied, *“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more”* (Jeremiah 31.33–34).

Why come to church if not to be changed? You are not supposed to remain the same after worship. You should not come here to have our own righteousness confirmed but to encounter the righteousness of Jesus, to be forgiven by Him, and then to be changed by Him. Why go through Lent, go to church at all if not to be changed in heart, mind, and action and to be more like Christ?

Listen to Luther, “You must hear the Gospel from [Christ]; you must let yourself be taught and instructed; you must not resist the message. Then the Holy Spirit can be effective in you through the Word and implant and impress Christ in your heart, with the result that henceforth you speak differently, believe differently, suffer differently, do good works differently, and declare: “Now I will bear whatever suffering is imposed for the sake of God’s Word.” Now the tree has become good, and its fruit will also be pleasing and good (Matt. 12:33)” (LW 23.151–152).

And in another place Luther writes, “The whole man must crawl into the gospel and become new. He must shed his old skin as does the snake. When the snake’s skin becomes old, it looks for a narrow hole in the rock, crawls in it, sheds its skin, and lets it lie outside in front of the hole. In like manner must man enter into the gospel and the word of God, must boldly believe its promise that God does not lie; in doing so he sheds his old skin and leaves lying outside his light, his conceit, his will, his love, his desire, his words, his deeds. Then he becomes entirely different, a new being who looks at all things differently from the former way. He judges and considers differently, thinks, wills, speaks, loves differently, desires, performs and behaves differently” (LW 52.79).

Today, your heavenly Father sees the distance between your righteousness and His righteous expectations. But into that void the Father places the righteousness of Christ. He has lived the right way for you so that your heavenly Father sees you as someone already made new. *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”* (2 Cor. 5.17). But by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in you, guided by the Word of God and the law that His has written on your heart, you are beginning to be different; different than the world and more like Jesus. And it shall be so among us.

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

Back into Alignment

Sermon on Numbers 21.4–9 for Lent 4B on March 10, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Our text from Numbers twenty-one begins, *“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way”* (Num. 21.4).

The children of Israel are not like those cute kids in the back seat wanting to know if “we’re there yet.” No. The children of Israel are like those back-seat drivers who just cannot stop. It might have been tolerable at the start, but they had been wandering in the wilderness for forty years at this point (Num. 33.38), one year for every day that they had spied out the land of Canaan without trusting God (Num. 14.34). Now, they had arrived at Mount Hor, just southwest of the Promised Land. They know they need to journey northeast. But Moses leads them southeast to go around Edom since Edom will not let them pass through their territory. So, the children of Israel become impatient. The nation is veering the wrong way. It is as if the vehicle is out of alignment. But the children of Israel are convinced that it is not the vehicle that is out of alignment but the driver.

“And the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food’” (Num. 21.5).

It’s one thing to complain. It’s another to accuse. But the children of Israel do both. In their impatience, they, once again, call God to account for bringing them out into the wilderness to die. They say they would have rather been slaves in Egypt. At least they had food. Even though God provided food for them in the wilderness, they say, *“there is no food”* and then they contradict themselves and call God’s food *“worthless.”* In rejecting the provision, they reject the Provider.

We have all complained to God like this. We have all thought it would be better to go back in time. We don’t know why it was better, it just was. We’d rather go back to those days than live these days. But Israel did not stop with that complaint, and neither do we. We not only long for the good old days, we doubt God’s purposes for us today. *“It’s pointless and God’s gifts are worthless,”* Israel said, and isn’t it amazing how Satan is able to get our minds in the same, faithless rut.

It’s easy to point out problems, like a car out of alignment. It doesn’t take brains, skill, or virtue. But it does take faith to trust God in the problems. *“For we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Eph. 2.10). How does God prove good works but through bad times? How else does He prove His goodness to us? But how often do we loathe His Supper and consider it worthless food when, in fact, it is the way Jesus wants to be recognized among us (Luke 24.35)? Our complaints and accusations reveal that we, like the children of Israel, are impatient and slow of heart to believe (Luke 24.25).

“Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (Num. 21.6).

God does not desire the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18.23). But He does give people over to their self-destructive ways (Rom. 1). In their persistent unbelief, *“many people of Israel died.”* God did not desire their death but wanted them to turn to Him and live (Ezek. 18.23). *“Return to the Lord for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”* (Joel 2.13).

“And the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people” (Numbers 21.7).

It’s easy to point out the problems, but it takes faith to trust God in the problems and consider them to be God’s way of calling us to repentance, calling us back into alignment with Him. So, while we spend our lives avoiding disaster, calamity, and affliction, what do we do when God brings them into our lives anyway? The Lutheran theologian, Johann Gerhard, wrote, “Disasters are like sermons of the Law preached in things, by whose preaching the Holy Spirit wants to be effectual in the hearts of people for the knowledge and hatred of their sins” (TC 14.294). Disasters call us to repent.

“Disaster” has an interesting etymology. You can hear that the root of “disaster” is *astro*, the Latin word for star. In other words, disasters suggest that something is out of alignment. Some people blame the unlucky stars for disaster. The children of Israel blamed Moses and God Himself. When people asked Jesus about disasters, wondering if they happened to people because they were worse sinners than others, Jesus said, *“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”* (Luke 13.3, 5). In other words, it’s not the car or the driver that is out of alignment but us backseat drivers. If we are listening, we will hear disasters, calamities, and afflictions preaching to us that we are out of alignment with God. We will hear them calling us to repent and return to God. *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”* (John 6.68).

Temporal disaster points us to eternal alignment with God. Temporal calamity points us to eternal security in God. Temporal affliction points us to eternal celebration with God.

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live” (Numbers 21.8–9).

Through a mediator, Moses, God made a way for His people to live. They had brought about their own death. But God rescued them from their self-destruction. Through the Mediator, Jesus Christ, God has made a way for us, His people, to live. We bring about our own death through our own sin. But God has rescued us from our self-destruction. *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”* (John 3.14–15).

Jesus is the one God has given us to look at and live. Look at Him, not as He was on the Mount of Transfiguration in all His glory, but as He hangs on a cross, like a bronze snake on a pole. There’s the Healer of Souls, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the One who bore your sin in His own body and now forgives you completely. This is why He came into the world, to give His life, that whoever would look at Him through the eyes of faith would be healed and live, not just a life in this disastrous, unaligned world, but a full and abundant life in the perfect world to come.

Where do we see Jesus today? We do not look for Him in how well things are going or in the absence of disaster, calamity, and affliction. We look for Him where He has promised to be at all times. He has promised to be in His Supper. This is where He wants to be recognized among us (Luke 24.35). This is where we see Him. This is where He puts us back into alignment with God. Thanks be to God that He has made Himself findable for us in Jesus. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, but God has made us alive in Christ (Eph. 2.5).

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

The Two Sides of Lent

Sermon on John 2.13–22 for Lent 3B on March 3, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

How about the weather this week? It was all over the place. We experienced the extremes. When I visited Audy Gohr this week at St. Camillus, the receptionist said to me, “It’s bipolar Wisconsin.”

The season of Lent is a little like that, isn’t it? On the one hand, Lent confronts us with the harsh reality of our sin. We look at the cross and we see the price Jesus had to pay for us. On the other hand, Lent comforts us with the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s overwhelming grace. We look at the cross and we see Jesus’ love for us.

Those two sides of Lent, those two extremes, are present in John chapter two. We saw the one extreme in our Gospel Lesson for today. Listen again: *“In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade’”* (John 2.14–16).

We encountered a very different side of Jesus last week. Do you remember the sermon last Sunday? That would have been a hard question right after worship last Sunday! The sermon had to do with Jesus being different than we might want or expect Him to be. We want and expect a Jesus who is successful. So, when He foretold His suffering, death, and resurrection, Peter tried to stand in His way. He was not about to let Jesus’ ministry fail. But Jesus did not come to succeed in the human sense by being impressive and attractive. He came *“to give His life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10.45). He let it all happen according to the plan of His Father and for the purpose of our salvation.

Today, we see a very different side of Jesus. This is the other extreme, you might say, and the season of Lent puts them back-to-back. Jesus is not passive now! With a whip in His hand, He turns over tables, drives out the people and animals together, and cleans out the temple of God.

Would you like to encounter Jesus in this mood? Is there anything about you that might make Jesus mad? Is there an attitude that might ignite His righteous indignation? Is there an action that clearly violates His clear commandments that we heard again today? Is there anything in your life that would cause Jesus to drive you out of His presence? Those are questions to consider in this season of Lent. *“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?”* (1 Corinthians 6.19). In other words, now is the time to ask Jesus to enter your soul as His own temple with whip in hand and drive out anything and everything that does not belong.

Maybe you can remember a time when your parents were really angry with you. Maybe you can remember many times your parents were really angry with you. Maybe they had an anger problem. I don’t know how you experienced anger as a child. You might have had someone in your life who seemed to always be angry. But you might have had someone in your life who rarely got angry except for that one time when you made them really mad. Is there someone like that in your life? I remember one particular teacher in my grade school years. He was the most mild-manner man. He was like Mr. Rogers. But I made him mad one time and I still remember it. It’s not that mild-mannered people become different people. It’s that they only get angry for a very good reason.

This is not bipolar Jesus we are meeting in John chapter two. This is not a different Jesus, either. In fact, He is not even acting out of character. This is still our patient, merciful Jesus acting out of love and compassion for His people. Yes, He was angry. But He had very good reason to be angry. If last week we saw Jesus love us enough to be unsettlingly passive, today we see Jesus love us enough to be disruptively active. Jesus even loves His enemies enough to disrupt them and wake them up from their sins. Their sins are not good for them and the wages of sin is death. And the same goes for you. Jesus loves you enough to hold you accountable for your sins and even to be angry with you because of them.

But why was Jesus so angry in the temple that day? People were in the right place. Better in the temple than anywhere else. People were probably wearing the right clothes. People were probably saying the right things. People were certainly doing the right things, buying animals to sacrifice to God. What's the problem? The issue is those first three commandments we read again today. The outward rituals left no room for the inward realities. The business of man making money left no room for the business of God making people holy. Jesus' anger in the temple is no different than God's anger against His people when they worshipped the golden calf, almost immediately after He had given them the ten commandments. It's called idolatry and we sinners have a habit of letting all kinds of things take God's place. But Jesus loves us enough to be angry with us, to drive those things away, and to make room for a temple to be a temple, a place where God communes with us.

Jesus has made a way for the holy God to commune with us sinners. He made a way through the temple of His own body. In anger and with whip in hand, sinful people drove the sinless Jesus out of the city and killed Him. But Jesus loved us enough to let that happen because He is our priceless Lamb of sacrifice that no money could buy. His sinless blood sacrificed once for all has cleansed our souls from sin and opened up the possibility and the space for us to be temples of His Holy Spirit.

Today, we will again receive into our temples, the temple of Jesus' body, given into death for us and the forgiveness of our sins. He enters us by means of bread and wine, with whip in hand, to overturn the tables and drive out whatever does not belong in us. But He also enters by means of His body and blood in order to enact communion with God in us.

If you remember, I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon that John chapter two has the two sides of Lent; the harsh reality of our sin and our need for a Savior on the one hand, as well as the depth of Jesus' love for us and the fact that we have a Savior on the other. We see those two sides of Lent when we look at the contrast between last Sunday and this Sunday. But we see the same two sides of Lent in John chapter two. We've heard the account of Jesus' anger in the temple. But just before that, right next to it, back-to-back, Jesus performs His first miracles at the wedding in Cana.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus turns 180 gallons water into the finest wine anyone had tasted to facilitate the continuation of a wedding celebration. This is depicted in the stained-glass window back there. That first miracle of Jesus at the beginning of His ministry functions as a bookend with the goal of Jesus' ministry. In the end, God will make a feast of rich food and the finest of wine at the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom that will have no end. There will be no temple there. It will be God and His people in everlasting communion.

Why does Jesus get so angry at our sin, at moneychangers in the temple, at anything that violates God's commandments? It's because He desires eternal communion with us. So, while Lent might have these two extremes, our sin and God's grace, only one of those will last forever.

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

Actively Passive

Sermon on Mark 8.27–38 for Lent 2B on February 25, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

How would you like to be Peter? He is publicly praised by Jesus in one moment for saying the right thing and then in the very next moment publicly rebuked by Jesus for saying the wrong thing and for setting his mind on the things of man rather than the things of God. It does not take much to imagine the feeling. This is our daily life, isn't it? Getting it right one moment but not the next.

So, we can understand Peter on an emotional level, but I think we can also understand his thoughts. I imagine him thinking: "You, Jesus, are the Christ, the Anointed One. You are the answer to all our problems. You are the Man God sent to finally take action. Do you know how long we have been waiting for you? Do you realize how long it has been since God took action for us? So, if you're going to talk about suffering and death, if you're going to talk about an end to this whole mission of God, you need to know that I'm just not going to let that happen. It doesn't have to be like that. I know people are against you. I know it's been a hard week, a hard month, a hard ministry, but we can get through this, Jesus. You cannot fail us now." You can understand Peter, can't you?

Yes, from our standpoint, we know that Jesus had to go to the cross to save us. We know that Peter without knowing it was satanically standing in Jesus' way and in the way of our salvation. But put yourself in Peter's place. Better yet, realize that you're already standing there with Peter, the pebble. You're standing there with him acting like a couple of big boulders in Jesus' path. Jesus might be saying that it's time to end the mission in apparent failure, but you're just not going to let that happen. You need Jesus to save you. You need God to act. So, I understand Peter. I'm right there with him. In fact, I think I understand Peter more than I understand Jesus.

Here's our problem and Peter's. We want a certain kind of Jesus. We want a Jesus who wins and succeeds, not a Jesus who loses and fails. We want a Jesus who is attractive to people and impresses people, not a Jesus who just gets rejected and killed. We want a Jesus who acts, not a Jesus who just lets things happen to Him. The problem is, of course, the kind of Jesus we want is not the kind of Jesus we have. And we know that is God's mercy.

Where did Peter get the idea that Jesus should be successful? God tells us, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways*" (Isaiah 55.8). So success is a human desire.

But it's more than that. Peter had spent years watching Jesus impress people and it was really nice. It was really good to be a follower of the Jesus who impresses people. It's a lot easier to tell your mother-in-law that you've dropped everything to run around with a travelling preacher when that preacher is successful. An impressive teacher makes an impressive disciple. An impressive Jesus makes an impressive Peter.

In the glory days of Jesus' ministry, I think it was possible that Peter actually thought Jesus took him on for his skills in such things as leadership and marketing. "Why else would Jesus call me to follow Him?" But if Jesus failed, then Peter would fail and he is just not going to let that happen. The bottom line is pretty clear, isn't it? Peter loves himself above all. As Jesus says, "*you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man*" (Mark 8.33).

Well, guess what? You're just like Peter. You want an impressive Jesus instead of a rejected Jesus so that you can impress. You want Jesus to succeed so that you can succeed. You want an active Jesus not a passive Jesus so that you can achieve. We will not let the opposite happen.

Thank God, His thoughts are not our thoughts. Last week, we read the account of the real Jesus being baptized in the Jordan and then led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. He was completely passive in that. He let it all happen. Now, in the account for today, Jesus describes letting even more things happen to Him: *"the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again"* (Mark 8.31). In other words, to confess that Jesus is the Christ, like Peter does, is not to confess an impressive, active Jesus but a passive Jesus, a suffering and dying Jesus, and only eventually a risen Jesus.

And we might be able to come to terms with that kind *Jesus*. We know He does not fail in the end, even though it looks like it for a moment. That might be fine for *Jesus*. But Jesus says it's not just for Him: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Mark 8.34).

It's interesting that Jesus tells His disciples what it means to follow after Him as they are literally following after Him, walking *"on the way"* (8.27). They were walking the pilgrim way to the cross with Jesus. What does it mean to follow Him? It is not about doing great, impressive, successful things for God. Following Jesus, the real Jesus, is about letting God do great things.

Sometimes, we get the idea that in order to be a real, strong, impressive Christian you have to do something impressive. You all know Christians who do impressive things. I read a story about a doctor in Alabama who walked six miles in the middle of an ice storm to perform a surgery that saved someone's life. I read another story about a man in inner-city Jacksonville who cared for dozens of kids from broken homes, and they called him Pastor Terry even though he was never ordained. Those impressive stories are reasons to praise God. Those Christians glorify God and serve their neighbor. But is that what it means to take up your cross and follow Jesus?

Sometimes, we get the idea that in order to be a real, strong, impressive Christian you have to have an impressive story of suffering. You all know people who have gone through unbelievably challenging things but did in a faithful way with a smile on their face and never complained about it, at least not that we ever heard. That is certainly cross-like, but the problem with that is that Christians are not the only ones who suffer incredible pain and loss.

We need a better answer to the questions, What does it mean to walk in the footsteps of Jesus? What does it mean to follow Him on the pilgrim way that leads to the cross?

Julie's brother Mark in Indiana has a dog named Clyde. When Clyde gets into trouble, when he's chasing a squirrel or digging a whole, Mark yells, "Leave it. Leave it, Clyde." There's our answer. Bearing the cross is letting it happen, suffering it, letting God do things God's way, letting God work His works. Just leave it.

What are you proud of accomplishing? Leave it. Forget about it. Let it go. It means nothing compared to knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. What are you embarrassed about? Leave it. Forget about it. Let it go. God does not grade you on a scale of accomplishments and achievements. You'd never measure up if He did. God has accomplished everything for you and now asks you to receive, just like the way you were baptized. That is bearing the cross. Let go of what you have done and what you haven't done and hold onto what God has done for you.

If we need a biblical example beyond Jesus, we should look at St. Paul. He writes this in 2 Corinthians chapter twelve, *“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12.7–10).

In a sense, Jesus rebuked Paul just like he rebuked Peter. Today, we are blessed to hear His rebuke to us: *“you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man”* (Mark 8:33). The things of God don’t hinge on our accomplishments. God is the one acting in our lives and He calls us to be passive and let Him do that. It was that way when we were saved, as Paul says, *“While we were still weak . . . while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5.6–8). But it is that way all the way through our lives of carrying the cross. Following Jesus is not about doing great things for God but letting God do great things for you and in you.

The question is, will we leave it, let it be, and let it happen?

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

Steadfast under Trial

Sermon on James 1.12–18 for Lent 1B on February 18, 2024

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

Every one of us has faced that critical decision, standing there with the refrigerator door wide open, not really knowing how we got there, knowing full well that we should not be there, but, for some strange reason, standing there giving that unneeded snack serious consideration, anyway. Maybe I need to post a little sign with James 1.12: *“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.”* You know you’ll be better off in the long run if you do not give in to the temptation in the moment.

That is not exactly what James has in mind, here, but that kind of moment of decision, gives us a little picture of one kind of trial that I believe James is talking about, and that is the temptation to sin. The temptation to sin enters our lives even without our being aware of it, like standing at the refrigerator and seriously wondering how we got there. The temptation to sin finds us when we least expect it and when our guard is down. Sometimes we even see it coming, but we do nothing to stop it.

No matter how we arrive at that temptation to sin, it presents us with a moment of decision, a fork in the road. Jesus says, *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Mark 14.38). We should not use that as an excuse. But our flesh is weak when it comes to a little extra desert, or that midnight snack, or just one more drink. But those are little things. Our flesh is even weaker when it comes to that angry word at the person we have vowed to love and to cherish, or that lustful look in the wrong direction, or that constant need for approval and significance, or that fear of other peoples’ opinions and judgments that seem to drive us to places we don’t really want to go. Our flesh is weak when it comes to our willingness to admit that we are wrong and our failure to forgive those who wrong us. But underneath it all, our flesh is weakest when it comes to fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things.

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.” We know we should walk a certain path and for some reason we think about walking the other way. We know we shouldn’t walk a certain path and for some strange reason we give it serious consideration, anyway. This is the trial called the temptation to sin; the temptation to go against the desire of God and to follow the desire of our hearts. What does James say? *“[E]ach person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers”* (James 1.14–16).

But, as I said, we face another trial that’s deeper and more difficult than the temptation to sin, don’t we? When things go wrong, when the wheels seem to be falling off, when we are dealing with more than we think we can handle, it’s not only a trial of patience, endurance, and resilience, but, most of all, it’s a trial of faith. In this trial, the temptation is to doubt God. We ask Him all the questions. Why me? Why this? Why now? Sometimes we get answers. More often we do not. Are we alone? Is God looking the other way? Does He hear? Does He care?

You know the answers to those questions. God’s Word is very clear. God is with you. God sees. God hears. God cares. Look at the cross. God did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all (Romans 8.32). Blessed is the person in the long run who does not turn away from trusting God in the moment. Or, as James says, *“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him”* (James 1.12).

How about the trials Abraham experienced? When he was seventy-five years old, God told him to pick up and go to a place that He would show him (Genesis 12.1, 4). He didn't question. Why me? Why this? Why now? He just went. He went on the strength of God's promise: *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing"* (Genesis 12.2). But even after Abram arrived in the land God showed him, he still had no children. When Abram was ninety-nine years old, God changed his name from Abram to Abraham, because God again promised to him that he would be the father of a great nation, even though he had no children. Sarah laughed at this promise. But when Abraham was one-hundred years old and Sarah was ninety, God finally gave them a son named Isaac, which means "laughter" because it was God who had the last laugh.

But then comes the trial recorded in our Old Testament Lesson for today: *"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you'"* (Genesis 22.1-2). Amazingly, Abraham does not question. *"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial."* Abraham is that man. He goes. He builds the altar. He ties up his one and only son. He places him on the altar. He even takes out the knife. *"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me"* (Genesis 22.12). It was a trial from God Abraham endured, a test from God Abraham passed.

There is no record of any other man receiving a test like that. God asks no one else in human history to sacrifice their son. God has never asked any of us to do that. Some of you have suffered the death of your children, though, which must be an excruciating test of faith, but none of us have been asked by God to actively sacrifice our children. Not even Abraham had to go through that.

Why? Because as blessed a man as Abraham was, there was another Man even more blessed. As steadfast as Abraham was under trial, there was another Man who was steadfast under an even greater trial, and it starts with our Gospel Lesson. After Jesus was baptized and anointed to be our Substitute, the Lamb that God provided to die in our place, *"The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan"* (Mark 1.12-13a).

What was the temptation? What was the trial? In relation to His Father, the temptation might have been to believe that He was still there, even when He might have felt completely alone in the wilderness. In relation to His mission, the temptation might have been, "Live for yourself. Use your divine power to feed yourself, glorify yourself, serve yourself. Find a way to avoid the cross. Sinners are not worth it. Most of them won't receive it. Find a way to be like Isaac." No. *"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial,"* we believe that Jesus is that Man.

And then, when it came time for Jesus to climb that same mountain Abraham and Isaac had climbed long before him, He knew His Father would not send an angel to intervene. No ram would suddenly appear at the last moment. He didn't question where the sacrifice was. He was it. There was no escape. Can you imagine that trial? But He was steadfast under it. He was crucified, died, and was buried. *"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial,"* says James, but then comes the reference to Jesus' resurrection, *"for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him."* Jesus is that Man.

You and I are blessed not so much because we have been steadfast under a trial like Abraham, nor because we have been steadfast under a trial like Jesus, but because we can claim the place of Isaac, we can claim Jesus as your substitute. He remained steadfast under trial for you. He died for you. He lives for you. He promises to you the crown of life because He passed God's greatest test.

But with that future secure, God invites you today to walk the path only His children walk. It's a difficult path. But take heart that you are following in the footsteps of Abraham. You are following in the footsteps of Jesus. In commenting on Abraham's test of faith, Luther wrote, "God doesn't test us because he enjoys it. He tests us to find out whether we love him above all things" (LW 4.93). And that is why James goes on to say, "*Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one*" (1.13). God tests our faith but does not tempt us to disbelief. That's the devil's department.

So, James goes on to say, "*Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*" (James 1.16–17). In other words, God tests, but when He tests, He gives us good and perfect gifts. He tests us to find out whether we love Him above all things, and what is more, He sees us through those tests with His love. He gives us His good and perfect gifts to guide us through.

What are they? There are many. But let's thank Him for three today: His Word, His Holy Spirit, and prayer. In our Gospel Lesson for today, all three of these are at work in Jesus. He knew the Word of God and it was His weapon against the temptations of Satan. The Holy Spirit was there to guide Him to that wilderness but also through it. And Jesus, as man, prayed to the Father.

When you face temptations to sin, temptations to doubt, or any other kind of test, receive again the good and perfect gifts of God: His Word, His Spirit, and prayer. If we did not have trials, we would not realize what great gifts these are or use them. But when we're being tested by God, we rely on these gifts like no other. And with these gifts, God will bring you through and you will be better for it.

And because of that, James writes what he does just before our text for today, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind*" (James 1.2–6).

Sometimes we are like waves driven by the wind, all over the place spiritual speaking. Jesus, the Rock, is not like that. He has been steadfast for you, even to death, so that you can have the crown of life. But He is also steadfast with you, so that you can endure the trials God puts in your path.

But your path leads to a place where there will be no more temptations to sin, and no more temptations to doubt. Paradise is a place without trials and without tests. And, while I cannot quote the chapter and verse, I think it is safe to say there aren't any refrigerators there, either.

"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him" (James 1.12).

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

Enter Jesus

Sermon on 2 Kings 2.1–12 and Mark 9.2–9 for Transfiguration Sunday on February 11, 2024
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.

That is what Shakespeare wrote in the play *As You Like It*. But one player on this world's stage named Elijah made his exit and then waited for a long time, while many other acts took place, before he made his entrance again. Elijah's "exit stage left" was cued very well. The sons of the prophets both in Bethel and in Jericho said to Elisha, "*Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?*" "*Yes, I know it; keep quiet,*" Elisha said. He wasn't too happy about it. Elijah was his master and his mentor, and his exit meant a new and greater role for Elisha.

Even more interesting than the way Elijah's exit was announced was the way he left. Before Elijah, there was only one other man who had left the world's stage in a similar way, and there has only been one man since. In a much earlier act, there was a man named Enoch. When the Holy Spirit tells us about Enoch's ancestors and descendants, He tells us that they all had so many years and then they died. But the Holy Spirit says something different about Enoch: "*Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him*" (Genesis 5.24). Everyone else exited the world's stage through death and that will be our exit also if the play is still running. But Elijah took his bow in a different way: "*And as [Elijah and Elisha] still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven*" (2 Kings 2.11).

All the world's players other than Enoch died. But why did the LORD not let Elijah die? Because his part in the play was not complete. For a long time, Elijah waited in the wings as generation after generations came on the scene. Elijah waited while the monarchy of Israel rose and fell; while the kingdom divided and the people were scattered; while the Assyrians and Babylonians came and went; while Greece dominated and Rome conquered; while the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and all the others took center stage to deliver the lines the Holy Spirit had prepared for them. But through it all, Elijah was not forgotten. He exited in 2 Kings, but in Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, in the last chapter, in the second to last verse, the Spirit says, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes*" (Malachi 4.5).

At that moment, as the Old Testament comes to a close, the stage lights seem to dim. Is it the end of the act or the end of the play? The Holy Spirit doesn't seem to be directing or even speaking. What happened to the script? Is the plot still advancing? Into that confusion, from the backstage shadows, a player enters in the ordinary way, being born of a woman, but she was uncommonly old and had been called barren (Luke 1.36). The Author added that beautiful detail to show that nothing is impossible in His play and to show that this player had a unique part to play. It began even before his birth. While he was still in his mother's womb, he jumped for joy because he realized that the LORD was near. Later, when he became a man, the Holy Spirit handed him very specific lines: "*After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*" (Mark 1.7–8). And the whole time he was dressed in camel's hair and a leather belt. That Elijah's costume! But unlike Elijah, who was taken up in a chariot of fire and a whirlwind, this prophet, like many before him, made his exit through the violence of those who hated his voice and silenced him.

But let's not miss the most important part he played. He set the stage for the Author Himself to take His place in the play. That is a frightening reality. We have not played our parts well at all. We've misplaced the script or decided to forget that it exists. We haven't followed very clear directions. We've improvised thinking we know better. We've taken a beautiful plot and turned it into a tragedy. So, the one who set the stage for the Author was clear. "Straighten this out before the Author arrives!" But then, when the Author-become-Player did arrive on the scene at the Jordan, he simply pointed and shouted, "*The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1.29).

Enter Jesus. He made Himself like us. But He played His part differently. He did not misplace or forget the script because He wrote it. He alone understood what was happening. He alone understood the role of that character who came before Him: "*That one,*" Jesus said about John, "*if you are prepared to accept it, that one is Elijah who is to come*" (Matthew 11.14). John was the one promised through Malachi who arrived just before "*the great and awesome day of the LORD.*"

That promise was not only about John who *resembled* Elijah, though. It was that. But it was more than that. The promise that the LORD would send Elijah before "*the great and awesome day*" also referred to the original Elijah himself, the one who had exited stage left in such a unique way. Now, after waiting all that time, he finally received his all-important cue to reenter. The scene is set on the top of a mountain. Peter, James, and John are there with Jesus. Moses enters as the Lawgiver from ancient times, the character who led the LORD's people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. But with Moses, enters Elijah, the one the script had said would come before the final act.

And then, "*suddenly, looking around, [Peter, James, and John] no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only*" (Mark 9.8). If the entrance of Moses and Elijah is important, their exit is even more important. Their exit means that they have been replaced. "*As for prophecies,*" said St. Paul, "*they will pass away*" (1 Corinthians 13.8), and with Elijah we see their passing. "*The law,*" Paul says, "*was our guardian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith*" (Galatians 3.24). So, the guardian took a bow, and with Moses we see its passing. And then Jesus, unmasked for a moment without His costume of humility, outshined the sun. From the cloud of divine presence came the voice of His Father, "*This is my beloved Son; listen to him*" (Mark 9.7b). At the end of the scene, it was Jesus only.

But Jesus' part also involved another mountain top. He climbed it for the greatest act. The setting was called the Place of a Skull and, there, He took His exit through suffering, humiliation, and death. He was not deficient, but He paid the price for our deficiencies. And we know that His payment was sufficient because Jesus did not exit the stage forever. Like Enoch and Elijah before Him, Jesus' exit was unique. He died for us, yes, but as His transfiguration foreshadows, He rose again in glory. But that resurrection is not only in His part. Everyone who is baptized into Him and believes in Him has been united to Him. His resurrection has now been added to your script. In Him, you have been given an inheritance of eternal life that will remain long after your part on this world's stage is over.

If Shakespeare is right that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," what part do you have? You have made your entrance, and, one day, you will make your exit. You might wonder about your role, how well you've played it, and what people will say about your performance after you're gone. But this play was never about you or any of us. Jesus' entrance onto this world's stage, his part that brought an end to the Law and the Prophets, His unique exit and reentrance, means that He is at the center of it all and stands at the end of it all. Your role and purpose is to live and play your part for the praise of His glory. And, as foreshadowed today, at the end, when it's all over, only Jesus will remain, but also everyone who has been united with Him.

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