

"COPING WITH OUR VALLEY OF DESPAIR"

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Scripture: Mark 9:2-8

Introduction

While you have your Bibles open would you look back a few verses and notice that Jesus and his disciples, in chapter 8:27, are up at Caesarea Philippi at the foot of Mt. Hermon, sort of an R & R retreat spot. Here Peter makes his confession that Jesus is the Christ, and immediately afterward in verses 31 and 32, Jesus speaks of his upcoming suffering, rejection, death and resurrection.

Then, moving forward in chapter 9:9, Jesus and the three disciples come down from the mountain into a valley and there is immediately brokenness, confusion, and conflict. Later in this same chapter, verses 30 and 31, once again Jesus speaks of his upcoming passion, and in chapter 10, for the third time, the same subject is brought up. Chapter 11 has the Palm Sunday event, and the rest of Mark is about Jesus' trial, rejection, death and resurrection.

Three of the next four Sundays the text of the sermon will be from Mark, so you may wish to read these chapters over and over again. This is the period of Lent, and we Christians go "the second mile" to prepare ourselves for this season.

Prayer

We, like the disciples of our God of old, believe that Jesus gave us the words of eternal life, so be present here by your Spirit, and speak to us through your word. Amen.

Sermon

At the most, Jesus' public ministry lasted only three years. The events we have talked about took place probably in the last three to six months of his life. The crowds had now dwindled; no longer did he have to preach from a boat offshore so as to avoid the trampling of the masses. Many said of his teaching that they were hard sayings and followed him no more. This led Jesus to ask his disciples if they, too, would leave him. They responded, "To whom should we go, for we believe and are sure that you have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God."

This explains why Jesus' tactics now change. He spends more and more time with his disciples, and much of the teaching is about what lies down the road--the suffering and death in Jerusalem. In fact, the third time he refers to this subject, the text says that Jesus was walking on ahead, and the disciples, following, were amazed and afraid. Can't you visualize

this--absorbed in his thoughts of the turning tide, rejection, eventually death--hardly conscious of those around him, Jesus seems aloof, the disciples sense a distance has developed between Jesus and them, and this bothers them.

My friends, during the three weeks away on vacation on the mainland, I had time to meditate and reflect. I spent a considerable time in Mark's Gospel, reading, studying a chapter each day, and when I came to the 15th chapter it was as if I were reading it for the first time. Our familiarity with the passion of Jesus often blinds us to its reality. That chapter describes a dark, terrible picture! Soldiers, guardians of law, order, and peace, Pax Romana, become sadistic, cruel; they taunt and ridicule Jesus. A group of religious leaders who are supposed to be teachers of what is good, right, ethical and moral, driven by jealousy become bigots calling for his crucifixion; the twelve disciples, his support system, have fled--only Peter remains and that at a safe distance; the hearing and trial before the High Priest and Pilate, places where justice should reign and prejudice and spite should be set aside--instead the trial becomes a mockery. And then that cruel method of execution planned only for criminals, that cross on Golgotha, a public place where bystanders became scoffers. It is enough to make one weep when you grasp the sordid story.

How could Jesus Himself, as well as his disciples, be prepared for such betrayal, treachery which leads to an indescribable death? This is where the morning's scripture lesson comes in:--the Transfiguration scene.

Jesus takes three of his disciples: Peter, James, and John--I gather they were the ones he felt the closest to; the three, perhaps, with the most insight, and even if not possessing complete comprehension of what was happening--they had heart, sincerity, inward honesty. Jesus takes them up the mountain, and there Jesus is transfigured before them. They see his glory--they see who he really is. Luke tells us that Jesus, Moses and Elijah talked together about Jesus' decease which was soon to take place in Jerusalem, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My Son, my Chosen, listen to him."

Jesus and his disciples needed this kind of mountain-top experience, this reassurance of their life's purpose; this which they could look back to in their darker days, and persevere while in the valley of despair.

Take Peter as an example. His second letter says: "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory--we heard this voice...for we were with him on the holy mountain." Peter, who made the great confession at Caesarea Philippi and who vowed loyalty to Christ with oaths and swearing; Peter, who after Jesus' death went back to his old life--fishing. This Peter was borne anew, he said, from despair to a living hope--why? Why this drastic turnabout?

Because he had seen who Jesus really was, and that following suffering, rejection and death there would be a resurrection. All that Jesus went through ends in death and the grave being conquered, and in Christ's

Kingdom which comes--all tears, pain and suffering will be done away with. Peter wrote these thoughts on encouragement in his letter to people who were going through hard places, trials, persecution.

What about you this morning? Do you ever go through valleys of despair? Can you identify with times of doubt, depression, discouragement which the disciples went through? Let me answer my own question. Yes, we do. Aren't we all made of the same flesh and blood and have times when we are in the doldrums, down in the dumps? I know I experience these lean times.

You may ask why God allows these valleys, these deep troughs in life. Why not always mountain-top experiences, always riding the crest of the waves? Let's consider that question for a moment. It is very important. Someone has said, if God is God and if He willed that we never had these down periods, then they would not happen. But they do happen, so it appears He allows ups and downs for our good. After all, if the weather was always sunshine, no clouds, no rain--the result is a desert. So rather than allowing parched souls and barren lives, in His providence and mercy, God allows trials to purify us, fires to consume the dross. Thus we become stronger, more patient, mature, experienced, more hopeful, more fit vessels for His purpose.

So what is your situation this morning? What do you face? Is it physical suffering: chronic pain, a debilitating illness, a life-threatening disease? Or has there been a death in the family, a break-up in relationships, a sense of guilt, a betrayal of trust? Or are there disappointments at school, in business, in your career, in your marriage? Or can't you even identify the cause of your low feelings?

In these times doubt has a tendency to replace faith. We become pessimists and forget our vision; everything seems blah or worse.

I have found the little parable in Mark 4 helpful. Jane Nagel brought back this insight from a conference she recently attended on the mainland.

In this parable there are two certainties: one is at the beginning, the seed is planted; the other is at the end, there is a harvest.

In between, Jesus says people may rise and sleep, really not understanding what is taking place.

In other words, God has started us on this journey, and at the end is His Kingdom of triumph. In our pilgrimage between the beginning and the end there are many things happening over which we have little control--but that does not mean God has abandoned us. His word says, "He that hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Christ Jesus." That's God's promise.

You may be thinking--all of this sounds beautiful here in Church. This is a beautiful setting. The flower arrangement is inspiring; the music is excellent; the birds singing outside can be heard through the open French doors. Things seem possible here in this atmosphere on Sunday morning. But what about tomorrow morning, Monday, when there often is nothing to

motivate me to get out of bed. Any practical advice to go with this sermonizing? I suggest that we turn to the saints of old, the mystics.

Mystics tell us that when we are down, feeling like doing nothing, that we should do the menial task at hand, whether it be sweeping the floor, writing a letter, doing an assignment. Then, somehow, as we do the menial task, we are able to move on to something we consider more significant.

Find a solitary place where you can pray and read the Bible, even if you don't feel like it. And if you lack concentration, read and pray aloud, and you will find that the good Lord begins to speak to you.

Don't make decisions at night when most of us are worn out and weary. Wait til morning when you are refreshed.

Personally, I have found it helpful at such times of inner emptiness to read the biography/autobiography of a Christian who labored amidst adversities--and often from their life's struggle, hope and vision is revived within me. We have many such challenging books with settings in the Islands; for example, Father Bond of Kohala; Lucy Thurston who labored in Kailua-Kona; Theodore Richards--you have your own favorites--re-read them.

Eventually, my brothers and sisters, who with me are on life's pilgrimage, the clouds will disappear, there will be light, the Lord will lift us up to higher ground.

Prayer

Our God, the words of the Gospel hymn writer are our prayer:

Our hearts have no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay
Though some may dwell where these abound
Our prayer, our aim, is higher ground.
Lord, lift me up and let me stand
By faith on heaven's tableland,
A higher plane than I have found:
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.