

March 29, 2020

“Walking With Peter: Getting It Right and Wrong”

Isaiah 55:6-13, Matthew 16:13-26

Have you ever felt or said something like this: “I know exactly what I want to do (am supposed to do) with my life, be when I grow up.” AND THEN, A FEW DAYS OR MONTHS (or three years into college) OR COUPLE OF DECADES LATER you end up saying or thinking: “I don’t think I can (want to) do (should be doing) this anymore.” Or, “This isn’t my passion anymore . . . maybe it never was.” Or getting laid off, “I thought this is what You wanted me to do, God.”

We look into that special someone’s eyes and say, “You are my soul mate; the one person that gets me. I can’t imagine being with anyone but you.” AND THEN, A FEW DAYS OR MONTHS OR COUPLE OF DECADES LATER you end up saying, “I don’t even know you anymore.” Or “I thought I knew you.” Or “I can’t stand being with you.”

Our “I know exactly” becomes “I have no idea.” Our “I’m certain” turns into “I’m not so sure anymore.” Our “I’m right” is suddenly “Maybe I was wrong all along.”

How often, like Peter, do you vacillate between moments/seasons of clarity and utter confusion?

We say, “I’ve never felt better and been healthier.” But then comes “The doctor says I have cancer.” And we are so confused: “What did I do?” “How could this be happening to me?” “What does this mean has to happen?” “Will my insurance cover this?”

We swear “I would never do or say such-and-such.” [Maybe that’s a behavior or practice; using certain words or substances; visiting different web sites.] And then we find ourselves saying, “Well, maybe I’ll just do this for a little while or a little bit as long as I don’t go overboard/lose control.” We might even utter, “It’s not as bad as I thought.”

Even with COVID-19 we are going back and forth between Clarity and Confusion. It’s definitely more confusion and chaos than clarity today. I’m filming this on Thursday, the first day of Shelter-in-Place, but by the time you see this it will be the weekend or later and we will all be less confused. We DO find ways to get our bearings; to get our legs under us; to get a bit more uncluttered in our brains in a lot of difficult situations. We might not have felt deep peace since this virus started hitting closer to home, but we started to get used to social distancing. Maybe we even got into a rhythm. There has certainly been some inconvenience; some of us have a steep technology-learning curve, but we start to adjust and see how some actual good things are developing . . . and how a shifting of priorities is happening in so many ways. Again, none of this has been great but even in the last week many have found more space and gotten more still. We have become thankful for what we do have and started caring for others more deeply. We have called our parents more often or checked in on our neighbors, siblings and kids/grandkids. And then, last night we get a "Shelter in Place" alert and everything gets confusing again! "Can we go into work?" "Is our workplace considered essential?" "What do you mean by "Shelter in Place?" I’m confused all over again.

I had gotten used to doing sermons without people in just over a week. Now I have to do them at home and need our son Andrew to pull off the technological set up. We had to find a place in the house and vacate the house, and move the little clock from the mantle so it wouldn't ding in the middle of my sermon. I got used to my little old flip phone. It was inefficient and limited but it was clear to me how to use it. And now, as of today, I have an iPhone; and so many of you can appreciate that I am VERY confused. **Confusion and chaos, where once there was clarity!**

We must acknowledge that **all of us** (because we are human and live in a broken world) go from "I see things clearly/more clearly" to "What in the world?" This happens spiritually too.

We say: "The Bible is completely reliable." And then we go off to college and take Philosophy 101 or Comparative Religions or Modern Literature or Anthropology or Geology or Biology (or we go to seminary), and find ourselves saying: "I'm not sure I can believe all this stuff."

We declare: "God will protect me and my family. I trust Him. He IS a good Shepherd. I love and resonate with Psalm 23." But something happens in our lives and we find ourselves asking: "Why would He allow my kid/mom/spouse/sibling to get sick, to get cancer, to die?"

We have deep faith and feel: "I know that God is with me and will never leave me." But that gets gnawed away over time or instantly in a disaster and we shout: "Where are You, God? Do You even care?"

Even for those of us who feel more secure in the authority of scripture, the protection of God, and the uniqueness of Jesus, we still have to figure out how to follow Him; WALK WITH HIM. Where does He want us to go? Where is He going? What does He want me to say, and to whom? What does He mean when He says I must forgive those who have sinned against me a bunch of times or love my enemies? How does He want me to join Him in issues related to justice/freedom? How do I find the same kind of rhythms He had for prayer, worship, stillness and solitude, reaching out with the Good News beyond His comfort zone, speaking the truth in love? It can be a little confusing, can't it?

And it's not just following Jesus: "seeing Jesus" for who He is can be difficult. Peter is right there with Him. He's taking it all in; witnessing miracle after miracle; hanging on every word; listening to what others are saying about Jesus and standing in His presence regularly. And Jesus asks this very important question: "Who do YOU say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15) And Peter gets it right! "You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the Living God." (Matthew 16:16) Ding, ding, ding! He is right. Clarity.

Doesn't it feel good to see things clearly? To see yourself and others clearly? To see Jesus clearly?

Peter has to be feeling good right about now. Probably a little smug as Jesus not only affirms him but tells Peter he'll be in charge moving forward. "I'm not Simon; I'm Peter – the Rock!

I'm the strong foundation upon which God's Church will be built. Hey guys, check out this key chain!" He's got Clarity; is seeing clearly. He feels good. But that doesn't last long, does it?

Somewhere in the next few days, when Jesus starts talking about suffering and death, Peter pipes in with some more definitive, strong language. "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to You!" (Matthew 16:22) He's pretty sure he's being clear-headed AND solidly faith-filled when he speaks up; he's pretty sure this is what Jesus meant by him being the Rock. Once again, Jesus is unpredictable and not always easy to track with. "Get behind Me, Satan." (Matthew 16:23) Peter thinks he's a building block, but Jesus tells him he's a stumbling block. Confusing.

So where did Peter go wrong? Where did his clarity around who Jesus was (which Jesus affirms) . . . [where does his clarity] disappear and confusion creep in? And maybe not just where does this change happen, but WHY?

Well, it's right here in the passage. What stands between Peter's clarity and confusion is described in verse 21. "From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . ." (Matthew 16:21)

We don't know the exact timeframe for the shift, but it's clear that this is where Peter goes from clarity to confusion. And in his confusion, he adamantly (and with great clarity) declares he would never let someone get their hands on Jesus. "Hey, Jesus, do I get another 'atta boy'? Do I get another key on my impressive chain?" Nope. Instead, Jesus lumps Peter in with the devil and all those who oppose God's reign and will. The joy (and even smugness/arrogance) of clarity is quickly followed by a jarring and humiliating lost-ness and confusion.

And it happens to all of us **when we go from salvation to suffering** . . . when we follow Jesus as Messiah and then find ourselves in a mess (or someone else's mess or our community's and world's messes, pain, and hurt). Suffering throws us almost every time! And JESUS' suffering is particularly difficult for Peter to have clarity about this side of the crucifixion and resurrection.

When we get confused we all ask a variety of questions: But I don't understand, if God is all powerful, if Jesus could have called down legions of angels to wipe out the enemy . . . why go through with it? Why suffer? And why keep following Him if it's going to lead to suffering? If He's really trying to build a movement, why lead with "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me."? (Matthew 16:24)

Jesus goes on to essentially say that if we think salvation is mostly about us getting out of the mess of sin and the suffering of life, then we've missed the point of what Christ's love and salvation really look and feel like.

Salvation and the Kingdom which He came to inaugurate isn't about getting and gaining: status, comfort, strength, power, stuff, CERTAINTY (and all things upwardly mobile). Instead Walking With Jesus is about losing our rights and privileges. It's about serving others; even suffering and laying our lives down for others and for the glory of God.

This is totally counterintuitive (confusing), but when we are willing to follow Jesus, not just as Savior but as Suffering Servant, we find He's not reduced in size, but grander and larger. If we keep following Jesus all the way to the Cross we find out that He keeps getting bigger; keeps enlarging the little picture we have of Him; keeps busting out of the box we put Him in.

In C.S Lewis' *Prince Caspian*, which is the second book in his *Chronicles of Narnia*, the four children find themselves back in Narnia on another adventure. They need to make their way to Prince Caspian and the many animals and dwarfs who are losing a battle to the evil King Miraz. But they haven't seen Aslan yet. Suddenly, Lucy catches a glimpse of him but then he's gone. None of the other kids see him and don't believe her. But a few nights later, Lucy is led to a grove of trees that comes alive and dances around Aslan. And the young girl and the large lion embrace. And then there is this beautiful dialogue:

"Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan," sobbed Lucy. "At last."

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all round her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

"Welcome, child," he said.

"Aslan, you're bigger," said Lucy.

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger." (page 141)

There's a lot of Confusion around Jesus AND the Gospel, but BOTH are bigger than we now understand. And we will never fully understand the largeness of the One who was big enough to save us and strong enough to suffer for us, and enter the lives of those who suffer too. But we can know Him more and more deeply as we follow Him all the way to the cross.

There's a LOT of confusion right now in our community and world. And there's a LOT of suffering (there always is and always has been). And more is coming; closer and closer to home. Let this moment, however long it lasts, draw us closer and closer to the One who is greater than we can ever get our hearts and minds around. Let us experience together, and demonstrate together, the greatness of our God.

May we with one voice declare, "Great are You, Lord!"