

Matthew 16:21-28 (NRSV)

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?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Poor Peter. In last week's Gospel reading, he alone among the disciples apparently understands who Jesus is and Jesus rewards him by calling him the rock on whom he would build his church. This week, in the very next paragraph in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus calls him Satan and a stumbling block. He goes from a Rock to a block, from a support to a hindrance, in less time than it takes to sink into the lake, which he also did a few weeks back. He must have the theological equivalent of whiplash.

Now, what did he say that got him in such trouble? All right, he was a little heavy-handed. Maybe he was feeling a little pumped up, enjoying his status as the big deal, the Rock of the

church. Did you know, by the way, that prior to this, Peter was not a name? No one was named Peter before Simon Peter. Now it is a pretty common name, but then it was the equivalent of calling someone Rock, a strange name for sure.

Rock takes it on himself to give Jesus some career advice, and Jesus doesn't take it well at all. Now, it is probably worth remembering that Peter isn't really being inconsistent, necessarily. Peter loves Jesus. Peter would walk on water for Jesus. Peter thinks Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God. So when Jesus tells the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to die, Peter tries to pull him aside. He's probably thinking, Jesus, this will be bad for morale and very bad for recruiting. We were thinking that you'd be the one to free us from the Romans and give the land back to the people of God. We need you safe so that you can save us.

The bottom line for Peter is that Jesus is too precious to waste, too precious to pour out onto the rocky ground of Jerusalem. And so Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." And maybe in the back of his mind, he's thinking this must never happen to *me* either. And I think many of us would be tempted to say exactly the same thing.

Let's be honest. This Gospel lesson makes scary reading. If you want to follow me, take up your cross. To find your life you must lose it. This is not what we want to hear. Jesus, we want to hear that your yoke is easy and your burden is light. We want to hear, "Come to me, all you that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." We want to hear that you came so that we could have life and have it abundantly.

We are happier with a God who promises us life rather than a God who promises us death, a God who promises us comfort rather than suffering, good times rather than bad. Why would anyone follow a God who promises bad times, suffering and death,

compared with one who offers good times, comfort and abundant life.

But here's the bottom line for God – Jesus promises us a life that is worth living, a life that has meaning in the eyes of God, a life that is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, a world in which God rules. It is unlikely that such a life will be full of comfort, unlikely that such a life will be all good times. And it is unlikely that such a life will be careful, but rather full of cares, not graceful, but full of grace.

In the eyes of God, life is to be *spent*, not *saved*. Spent in the doing of God's will, not saved for something more important, because there isn't anything more important. Peter wants Jesus to save his life, but God wants him to spend it because in spending his life Jesus is reconciling God's people to God's will for them. You see, Peter heard Jesus say that he must undergo great suffering and be killed and he stopped listening. He didn't hear Jesus say, "and on the third day, be raised." Peter's fear for Jesus, for himself, made him a little hard of hearing. Like many of us, Peter didn't let Jesus finish. On the third day, Jesus would be raised, brought home to his father, having lived a life that was worth living.

And I wonder how many of us hear the hard words of the Gospel and stop listening. We like to hear the easy words, words of comfort and love, and those are real. But there are other words, too, words of judgment, words to shake us out of our complacency because this world is not all warm fuzzies, this world does not listen willingly to God's word of judgment. We like being forgiven but we don't like to be reminded what we are being forgiven for.

In our discipleship group, we were talking about how both God and Satan can speak to us in a fairly pointed way. Both God and Satan remind us of our shortcomings. The word ha-Satan in Hebrew means, “the accuser.”

So, how do we tell whether that critical voice belongs to God or Satan? Well, one way is that Satan speaks to grind us down, to discourage us, to make us feel small. God speaks to pierce our selfishness, to remind us of our obligations and our humanity. Satan speaks to tear us down, God speaks to build us up. God forgives us and calls us to be changed; Satan accuses us to mire us in guilt and shame. God calls us to repent, Satan to break us down so that repentance is the last thing on our minds. God calls for courage, Satan appeals to fear.

And perhaps this is why Jesus reacts so negatively to Peter in today’s reading, calls him Satan, calls him a stumbling block. Because Jesus knows that sometimes it is hard for us to tell whether God is speaking or the Devil is. Peter is speaking to preserve a sinful world but Jesus is speaking to transform that world. Peter speaks from fear, Jesus speaks from hope. Peter speaks to avoid risk, but Jesus knows that risk is necessary for life to have meaning.

I will confess to you that sometimes I get discouraged. I think we all do. And yes, sometimes I hear a voice that criticizes me, that takes me to task for the things I say and do. And I think sometimes that the only thing that God and the Devil agree on is that I’m kind of a mess. But if that voice I hear belongs to God then that’s not the end of the sentence. Both God and Satan like me just the way I am, but God loves me too much to leave me that way. God wants to raise me up in this life and the next if I’ll just let him. Jeremiah writes, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

I know that there have been times in our North Wing construction project when we've gotten discouraged, when we've wondered whether God really wanted this thing to go forward. There have been times and there will still be times when things look bad. And just maybe we've wondered whether we'd be better off saving the money for something else. But that is not the time to stop listening – that's the time to *start* listening, to let Jesus finish the sentence. We need this space because ... we need this space because those trailers aren't conducive places for our children to learn the Word of God. We need this space because no congregation will grow beyond the space available to it and we want to grow and spread God's word. We need this space because Saint Nicholas will be here long after you and I are gone.

Peter isn't a bad guy in this reading – he is still the Rock of the Church and God will use him to spread the faith beyond everything Peter imagines. But Peter is afraid and in that moment of fear, he listens to Satan's counsel of safety rather than God's call for a risky, meaningful life, not risk for its own sake but risk for God's sake. We are called the same way, to a risky, meaningful life for God's sake. May God be praised.

Amen.