

COME DIE WITH ME

When Jesus Really Scares Me

Text: Matthew 16:21-25

The Call to a Cross Not a Cocoon or Cushion

Matthew's gospel says that toward the end of his three years of public ministry, "**Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.**" Hearing this, "**Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'**"

What Jesus then said in the face of this apparent devotion consistently forces me to define discipleship in terms that I don't think I'd ever get to by my self. The Bible says that "**Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'** Then Jesus said to his disciples, '**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.**'"

There are few words Jesus ever spoke that are scarier, I think, than these ones here -- particularly when you contrast them with some of the other invitations Jesus issues. When Jesus says, "***Come dine with me,***" come experience my fulfillment, most of us are pleased to accept. When Christ says, "***Come do life with me,***" experience the difference my companionship makes, many of us are naturally intrigued. When Jesus says, "***Come dance with me,***" come experience my joy, it seems like a good deal to follow him. But when he says what he says here -- when Jesus says: "***Come die with me,***" come take up a cross with me, come experience my death, there is something in almost all of us that cries out with the Apostle Peter, "**Never, Lord!**"

And this is only natural. From the cradle on we are taught that the goal of life is to preserve it. From the moment we're first strapped into our child safety seats to the day we are lying in a hospital room with tubes in our bodies, the continual message is: Preserve, protect, sustain, secure! It is not simply the maintenance of life but its continual maximization that we are taught in American life today. From early on, we absorb the message that the quality of one's life is directly related to the quantity of life-enhancements we have been able to secure. Our lives come to be defined by the titles and trophies we've amassed, the pleasures and privileges we enjoy, the sheepskins and the shape of our skin, our castles and coin-collections.

Somebody Has to Die

And, then, along comes Jesus. He tells us that we have defined life too superficially, too selfishly, too stupidly. He looks right into our eyes, as he did the Pharisees', and tells us that we're barely touching life as God intended it. He tells us to get off the fence we've been walking between the world's way and the kingdom's way. He challenges us to complete the circle of grace and not just demand it for ourselves because we've got a ticket. He calls us to patrol the pleasures we've allowed to invade our perimeter and conquer our hearts. He tells us to check our bags for the anxiety, fear, and anger we've been carrying so long that we don't see how burdened and blocked we still are by it. Jesus demands that we give outrageous grace to those who wish us harm and seek to take our land.

And, if we are truly hearing him, then we rightly recognize that the coming of Jesus requires *somebody's* death. If we are going to follow Jesus through the gate of the kingdom... if we are to be born anew into this life of God... then the way we've been taught to define Life, the way
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we've naturally come at Life, the Life or self we've become, has to die. It has to be lost. It has to be named and nailed and annihilated. And that will be painful and hard. It will demand something of the profound humility and courageous perseverance we see in Jesus as he carries *his* Cross.

It will mean periods of terrible thirsting for the substances that used to slake our thirst. It will mean times when we'll feel utterly forsaken by God. It will put us in a place of temporary vulnerability before the soldiers and mocking crowds of this world. It will mean cleaving to our spiritual family the way Mary and John were called to by Christ at the Cross. It will require a daily commitment of our Spirit into the Father's hands. It means a trusting obedience until God's work in and through us is completed here and we can say: "It is finished."

George MacDonald, the great Scots preacher, once wrote: It is crucial that we understand that "Christ died to save us, not from suffering, but from ourselves; not from injustice, far less from justice, but from being unjust. He died that we might live--but live as he lives, by dying as he died who died to himself that he might live unto God. If we do not die to ourselves, we cannot live to God, and he that does not live to God, is dead."¹

During Holy Week we are accustomed, I know, to focus on the death that the Palm Sunday crowd eventually called for. But if we stop there we miss much of the meaning of Good Friday and the Easter beyond. It is equally crucial that we remember the death that Christ called for. This death Christ calls for is a price entirely worth paying. It is the path to communion with God himself. It is the road to an eternal peace and prosperity. It is the only way to gain an unshakable faith, an unconquerable hope, and a life-changing love more precious than anything the crowds chase after. But this is what Jesus makes clear: This life doesn't come from simply *wearing* a cross; it comes from *bearing* a cross. Somebody, some life, some self has to die.

The DaVinci Code Jesus

No wonder they crucified *him*. No wonder some of even Jesus' would-be disciples said "**Never, Lord,**" I don't like this path you're talking about. I understand that. I understand why people still want to crucify Christ instead of die to self. There are times when I think I would rather have Dan Brown's *DaVinci Code* Jesus. I would like to rewrite the story of Jesus and make him someone who would never really insist on such difficult choices. I would like to view Jesus as someone who would never do something so radical as to deny himself the pleasure of sex... who got married to Mary Magdalene and had a child... whose real gospel was about touching the divine through physical pleasures and fertility.

If I can come to view, the Church of Jesus in the DaVinci Code way -- as just a collection of corrupt or misguided people... if I can simply caricature spiritual disciplines as some sort of sick, twisted masochism... it is freeing, in a way. I can take the parts of the biblical Jesus that I like, the ones that reinforce my lifestyle, that leave me feeling spiritual without much cost. I can wear a cross as jewelry, without feeling any need to bear a cross as a disciple. I can go on with life as I have it. I can keep the self I have. But I don't want that self. I want a better self. How about you? Don't you want the self that Jesus shows you, that Jesus says can be born in you, the kind of self he apparently gave to Arland D. Williams, Jr?

Cross at the Bridge

Does that name mean anything to you? If you've spent much time in the Washington D.C. area, you may know that there is a bridge by that name that crosses the Potomac River. I was not far from there on January 13th, 1982 when Air Florida Flight 90 iced-up upon takeoff, and crashed into those icy waters moments later. I remember watching, as many of you did on the news, the struggle to rescue the small number of survivors who treaded water for their life. Among the survivors was Arland Williams. As the *Washington Post* tells it: "five different times, a helicopter dropped a rope to save Williams. Five times, Williams passed the rope to other passengers in *Daniel D. Meyer / Christ Church of Oak Brook / 4-14-06*

worse shape than he was. When the rope was extended to Williams the sixth time, he could not take hold, and succumbed to the frigid waters. His heroism was not rash. Aware that his own strength was fading, [Williams] deliberately handed hope to someone else.”² Again and again and again and again and again – in the most difficult circumstances, Arland Williams made the choice to die to self, and in so doing became a glorious life that never dies.

There is a bridge to new life that stands at a place where Someone else once made some deliberate choices. **“No one takes my life from me,”** Jesus said to Peter and the other disciples shortly before walking to the Cross. **“No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”**³ In John 12:23 Jesus said: **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”** I tell you, **“the man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. [For] whoever serves me must follow me.”**⁴

We gather today to remember that when he might have elected otherwise, Jesus chose to take up his Cross, to pay the ultimate price for human sin, that you and I might be forgiven and live forever with God. Jesus chose to pass to you and me the rope of salvation. If you have never taken hold of it before, grab hold of that rope today, I beg of you. Let Christ pull you to safety. Let him wrap you in the blanket of his family. But once you’ve done that, don’t stop there. Don’t let the Cross be merely a symbol of the life Jesus had, or that you’ll have in heaven. Let it be a signpost to the life Christ calls you to in this world. Cross over the bridge and into the life of the Kingdom of God. You know the way into that city, don’t you? It’s the way marked out by Jesus, by Arland, and by every soul in every home and church and workplace and town who keeps making the difficult choice, the disciple’s choice. **“If [you] would come after me,”** said Jesus, **“[you] must deny [your]self and take up [your] cross and follow me.”** Sometimes this call and Cross causes us to tremble but, beloved, it’s the tremble of new life.

¹ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* (Series 3).

² "A Hero-Passenger Aids Others, Then Dies," *Washington Post* (1-14-82)

³ John 10:18

⁴ John 12:23-26

Why Jesus Remains the One We Have to Crown or Kill