

March 8, 2009

**The Second in Lent, Year B**

Mark 8:31-38

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

*The Rev'd Charles M. Girardeau, associate rector*

On a late October evening many years ago, four middle-thirty-somethings sat on the banks of the Rio Grande River and enjoyed the coming of evening on the last night of a seven day backpacking adventure. One was a lapsed Episcopalian, one a non-practicing Jew, one a confirmed atheist and the last was, and still is, an Episcopal priest – me. We had been on the trail for almost a week, and had, up until that moment, avoided the topics of politics, faith and spirituality. It had been painfully clear, on a previous week long hike together, that the vast differences of opinions between us about these matters would only create unnecessary tensions at the very best, and outright heated disagreements at the worst.

Then it happened. “Chuck, I just have to say it. You know that what you are doing is a total waste of time and energy. There is no God. What we see is it. No God. No heaven. No nothing. Nothing but this, here and now. When we die, that’s it. Over and out. Done.” I took a deep breath, said I disagreed with my atheist acquaintance and that I didn’t want to continue the discussion. When he pressed the issue, I excused myself, saying I was going for a solo walk to enjoy the coming of darkness and to say my prayers. Upon my return we thankfully carried on a non-confrontational conversation before turning in for a pre-dawn departure on a twenty-hour drive home.

In this morning’s gospel lesson we hear about friends on a journey, led by Jesus. They have seen extraordinary and wonderful things. The deaf have received hearing, the speechless have been given speech, unclean spirits have been driven out of those possessed, lepers have been healed and made clean, the wind and the waves have been calmed and thousands have been fed with just a few fish and loaves. They have learned important lessons from this amazing rabbi and just before this moment Peter has answered the question, “Who do you say I am,” with the words: “You are the Christ.”

“And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things...”

Walt Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor and author, in his book *The Book of God* imagines this event from Peter's point of view:

“~~He~~ [Jesus] said, "Things are going to change now." He heaved a sigh. We all were moving with him now toward the little spring of water. He said, "I have to go to Jerusalem. When I get there, I will suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes. I'm telling you now so that you need not be surprised when it happens. It will happen."

Jesus knelt down by the spring, cold from the earth. He made a cup of his hands and scooped water. Just before he started to drink, he said, "I will be killed in Jerusalem, and on the third day be raised --"

I spoke again. I said the most natural thing there was to say. Well, my feelings were so hurt by Jesus' words. Be **killed**?

I grabbed his wrist and shouted, "No!" The water splashed from his hands. "No, God won't allow it!" I cried.

On account of my feelings, I was gripping him with all my strength. But he started to pry my fingers from his wrist. He had terrible power in his hands.

I blustered on. Surely he knew that I was arguing out of love for him! "O Lord," I said, "this can never happen to you!"

After Jesus criticizes Peter, his thoughts continue: *"No, but I do care for the things of God! And I love you, Lord Jesus! This is so confusing. One minute I'm Peter; the next minute I'm Satan, but I didn't change!"* [pp. 706-707, italics in original]

Peter didn't want to hear the words of Jesus, did not want accept that things were about to change, and change drastically. The life he had come to know and enjoy at Jesus' side was coming to an end. Jesus begins to teach that a new and different time is at hand.

Peter clings to a human perspective, holding on to that which can be seen and understood. Jesus has begun to teach about *the faith*, the faith that has healed so many – calmed the seas. Jesus is starting to speak about matters eternal and the cost of discipleship. "I will be killed." "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." "Loose your life and save it." "Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words... of him will the Son of man also be ashamed."

We can be so much like Peter, with limited sight and hearing. Limited by the fact that we are human, and tend not to see beyond the moment, beyond what we know and hear and can control. This natural tendency, taken to the extreme, can cause us to loose sight of God and fall into complete disbelief. To one who has no faith it becomes easy to adopt the belief of my fellow hiker said who tried to continue the discussion after my resistance with, "Chuck, eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we will die."

I cannot help but to think that the "live for today and don't worry about tomorrow" mind set is a part of what has helped to create the present economic situation. I hope and pray that you and I will not be spiritually pulled under by the present financial crisis that grips so many people both here and throughout the world. For we can hear what Peter could not hear, we hold fast to the words Jesus spoke to Peter and those around Him, "and after three days [the Son of man will] rise again." We are here, today, because we desire to say the imagined thoughts of Peter, "I do care for the things of God! And I love you, Lord Jesus!"

Granted, we do tend to live for today. But we also have great hope, hope not only for tomorrow, but hope for the in-breaking in of God's Kingdom. We desire to be a part of that Kingdom. And so we live with faith, striving to have a faith like Abraham and Sarah. We live into all the ups and downs of life, and believe that "in these last days God sent [Jesus] to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world. In Christ, God has delivered us from

evil, and made us worthy to stand before God. In Christ, God has brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.”

The stark realities of the present time toss us to and fro. Living in an uncertain time can be uncomfortable, even frightening. But we are people of faith. People seeking a deeper relationship with and knowledge of God. And so we are not hopeless or lost.

During this season of Lent, we make and take additional time to reflect, listen, study and pray. We seek to bring ourselves again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of the Word, Jesus Christ as we travel with Him to Jerusalem, to the cross... and to resurrection.

Amen.