

"Life Wish"

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

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Hamden Plains United Methodist Church, Hamden, Connecticut

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A good friend and I have been in e-mail correspondence as Lent begins, a poor but necessary substitute for face-to-face conversation in light of COVID-19. They are very active in their church and disciplined in their faith.

Six days into Lent – that's last Tuesday for the purists – my friend wrote this:

Hi, Brian. Here's how this season of Lent has been going for me in one word....struggling....By Ash Wednesday I had quite a list of disciplines running through my head--the list was even longer than the one I composed for the new year! It was too much. This past week I felt like I was adding more stress to my life, more to my to do list, and more negative self-talk when I missed the mark. I ended up spending even less time connected to God.

Struggling. Anyone else on board with that?

Certainly Peter was in today's Gospel. The lectionary leaves out, as it sometimes does, some important information. In this case, Jesus has just asked the disciples who people say he is. After the disciples offer up what they've heard other people say about Jesus, Jesus asks them the question that is at the heart of Lent: *"But who do you say that I am?"*

In a flash Peter says, *"You are the Messiah."* A+, Peter. So far, so good.

Then it gets dicey. Jesus tells them what that means. And it's not what Peter or any of the rest of them thinks it means. It means Jesus will suffer. It means Jesus will be rejected by the very religion whose Messiah he was. It means Jesus will be killed.

Struggling. It doesn't begin to describe what Peter and the others must have felt.

And just as quickly, Peter's going to set Jesus straight. We don't have the words Peter used but it doesn't take much imagination: *"Jesus, don't talk like that! What's wrong with you? Do you have a death wish?"*

Death. It's all around us, right? 503,000 Americans dead from COVID-19 as of last Wednesday. 2.5 million worldwide. Death of Black folk at the hands of police. Death of police at the hands of the mob, nearly all of them white, that stormed the Capitol. Death of a young Yale graduate student. The slow death of alcohol and drugs.

Struggling? You bet. It does sometimes seem like we – the human race – has a death wish. But Jesus?

Well, no. What Jesus told Peter, and tells us, is that the cost of faithful discipleship is the cost of the cross. The cost of a burden no one has a right to ask us to carry. In Jesus' case, it was the burden of sinful people conspiring to undermine him and ultimately kill him because he threatened them. In Peter's case, it was coming to understand that God is sovereign, even when that sovereignty doesn't immediately make sense and even if it means Jesus has to call us "Satan," the adversary.

In our case, it means coming to terms with death, and choosing to understand death in the context of life: a life of service, a life of taking up the cross, a life with a "life wish." Marty sang shortly ago:

"Take up thy cross," the Savior said, "if thou wouldst my disciple be; deny thyself, the world forsake, and humbly follow after me."

Come on, Jesus. Lent just started! Couldn't we have a warm up? Or a do-over?

Struggling.

Funny, though. Sometimes the world "gets it" while Peter and the rest of us are struggling. This week I was reminded that Mahatma Gandhi, the great liberator of India from British colonial rule, said, *"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."* Not so different from Jesus' saying today.

Here's the kicker: this quotable quote came in a newsletter from our financial advisor! He understands, in ways we sometimes want to avoid, what Jesus was saying about death and life: that we all have an expiration date; that this life is the "real deal," not a dress rehearsal; and that accepting the truth of our mortality is the key to receiving Jesus' promise of rising again. As Jesus notes at the end of today's Gospel, *"Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."* You can't be resurrected unless you die.

That said, despite the reality of our mortality, God's yearning for us is life, not death. That's what Jesus means when he says that those who lose their life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it. That what God means when he says to Abram in today's Genesis reading, *"Walk before me and be blameless."* God's promise is one of life, so much so that he changes Abram's name to Abraham, from "exalted ancestor" to "ancestor of a multitude," referring to the nations that will come from Abraham's lineage. Being an exalted ancestor is good, but if I have the privilege of leaving a legacy, I'd rather be the ancestor of a multitude.

Speaking of a legacy, what are you leaving? Since we do know we have an expiration date – no matter how much Peter's avoidance lives in us – what is it you intend to bequeath to your heirs and to the world? What does it mean to you to lose your life to save it?

Many of us think, rightly, in terms of the impact we have on others: what good influence we have left, what spirit of kindness and mercy, what words our survivors will say about us. Ultimately, these things are an outcome of the life we live, day after day, mostly in acts so insignificant that we do not notice them. Sometimes our service is public and conspicuous; more often, not as much. Our character is how we behave when we think no one is looking, but as anyone who has raised a child knows, people are always looking.

In a minute I'll return to this theme of ethics and character, but let me pause here to offer a pragmatic word about legacies. Our Trustees have just spent three months getting this final portion of our financial

house in order. As many of you know, over the last two years our church has paid off indebtedness in varying forms. We are now in a position to pay our bills as they come due while maintaining reserve funds, which has allowed our leaders to lead, rather than constantly worry about survival. What the Trustees have done is to review our legacy gifts and our investment guidelines. We now have a record of the history of these funds and the terms by which they can be used. This is a huge achievement, one that will be reported in full at our Church Council meeting on March 25. It is one more step in regaining the confidence of our congregation in our stewardship, and I want to publicly thank the Trustees for this work.

I use this experience as a way to ask the question, *“What legacy will you leave your heirs?”* The reality is that most of us have more wealth than we realize. Is it organized and ready for your heirs when you meet your Maker, or have you left them a mess to clean up at the very time when they will be awash in grief?

One thing I learned as the Chief Executive Officer of The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport is that everyone has a will. I used to have fun with this at seminars, asking participants to raise their hand if they had a will. For those who did not raise their hand, I said to them what I now say to you, *“Everyone has a will. The only question is ‘Who wrote it?’ If you have not drawn up a will, the State of Connecticut will take care of that for you. So if you think the State will be a better steward of your assets than you and get them to those you love, you needn’t do a thing.”*

Ultimately, however, our legacy is about our character and our faith. Jesus calls us to take up the cross, that service and sacrifice that no one has a right to expect to us. Paul, in the letter to the Romans, reminds us that Abraham’s legacy as a father of nations came about because of his faith: faith in God who is generous in mercy and love, faith in God who makes and keeps promises, faith in God who sees beyond our imperfections and even beyond our mortality to see what is in our hearts.

All of which is why Paul says that Abraham's *faith* "*was reckoned to him as righteousness.*" I don't know about you, but like my friend whose story opened this sermon, there are times when I struggle. I read of God saying to Abraham "*Walk before me and be blameless*" and I think, "*Lord, who can do that?*" But Paul makes it clear that Abraham's faith is what allowed him to be blameless: fully convinced that God could do what God promised.

And then the clincher: "*Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.*"

It is for us, my friends, this God who makes and keeps promises. It is for us, my friends, this God who yearns for us to have full and abundant life. It is for us, my friends, this God who – in Jesus Christ – calls us to serve, to lose our lives for his sake and the Gospel's so that we may save them. It is for us to invest ourselves fully and completely in one another, with time, talent and treasure, to leave a legacy of life. Yes, there will be times of struggle. But as the Rev. Adam Hamilton says so succinctly, "*The worst word is not the last word.*" Faith in Jesus, who was unafraid of death, knowing it led to resurrection, is for us. It is for us, this faith in God that we live boldly now, a God whose yearning is not a death wish, but a life wish: here, and for all eternity.