

“Dead and Alive”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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Mark 8:31-38

Imagine poor Peter, in an anxious frenzy. This had gone sideways on him so fast. Somehow he’d just received the insight that Jesus was the Messiah, and he summoned the gumption to say it out loud. That was a risky word to throw around, Messiah, controversial. The Romans, in particular, weren’t fond of the word. And while in awe of Jesus, Peter probably felt proud that he’d gotten it right, probably felt a sense of ownership, because his pronouncement made it public, official.

Of course, Peter’s claim was nothing new. Before, during, and after Jesus’ time on earth, plenty of people claimed that title of Messiah or had it thrust upon them. All of them turned out to be false. They weren’t fakers. It was much too dangerous to pretend. No, they were false Messiahs because they all lost. They failed to meet the expectations of their followers, who then had to come to terms with the fact that they’d made the wrong call, all that time and effort wasted.

But that wasn’t going to happen to Peter. He knew about those jokers who wound up exiled or hiding in caves or killed, far from the victory they’d promised. The hopes and dreams of an oppressed, desperate people would not be disappointed again, not on his watch. So imagine poor Peter, fresh off making the right call, hearing Jesus saying something like this.

“OK, guys, here’s how it works. The end game involves me suffering, being rejected, and finally dying in agony on a cross. Now I’ll come back three days later, so everything’s going to be fine, but it’s going to get a lot worse before it gets any better. In fact, it’s going to be

downright nasty. They're going to mock me and torture me and humiliate me, but that's the deal."

Peter wasn't having any of it. "Jesus, can I have a private word, please? You seem confused about this whole Messiah thing. Your plan is actually the opposite of how it's supposed to go, but I can guide you through."

Jesus lashed back, "You satanic, demonic, presumptuous, ignorant, arrogant little . . . . Get away from me, Peter! You got the title right, but have no clue what it really means!"

Then Jesus gathered the crowd and told them, "I want you all dead," not exactly the encouraging, inspiring message they'd hoped for, and not quite the gentle Jesus we've got stuck in our heads. "What's more, to follow me, there can be no half measures. To live, you have to die, deny yourself, and if you're too invested in saving your skin, I'm done with you. Accept the scandal of who I am without shame, or go home, you greedy, cheating, lying, hypocritical, self-absorbed, fair-weather followers!"

And some in that crowd probably did go home. Others might have whispered, "Oh, he can't really mean that. This is some kind of code, like he uses in those confusing parables, and once we figure it out, it won't really be that bad." But they were wrong, and we, like them, still try to water this down, domesticate it, and deny its scandalous severity and call to sacrifice, because it just won't work. It's not practical. We're too busy, tied up, tied down, linked in, committed, obligated, with places to go and people to meet, bills to pay, and for the most part, most of the time, most of us are satisfied with life, so dying doesn't hold much appeal.

But what Jesus said to the crowd and his disciples, he says to us. "I want you all dead. I want you to pick up a cross and haul it until I tell you to stop, or else." And he means it. Part of me wishes he didn't, but he does. If we want to follow Jesus, we can't pick and choose, because

the only path that leads to real life goes straight through a cross, with all of its struggle and pain and exposure. It isn't easy being Christian, because it wasn't easy being Christ.

The cross Jesus bore was heavy with the sin of the whole world, weighed down with malice and spite and vengeance, the hatreds born of pride and fear. He carried that old rugged cross through the streets of Jerusalem, piled high with self-indulgence and illusions of control and all manner of things – more than could ever be named – that mess up our relationship with God. He dragged that wood through the dirt so that we could be made clean and gave his life so that we might be forgiven and live.

Sheer gratitude demands that we accept that gift with humility and die, not to deserve or repay that sacrifice. It's impossible. Nothing we say or do or think can validate or vindicate what Jesus did. The Resurrection already did that. Our sole response is to die obediently with Jesus, to allow him to conquer the sin still within us by opening our hearts to his presence, and that's going to hurt something fierce.

To lay down our rage at the feet of Jesus, even when we have good reason to be mad; to surrender our passion for payback, our pretense of superiority over those who oppose us, and let Jesus convert that unholy fire into the spiritual flame of forgiveness, that's going to hurt. Unbridled anger keeps us warm with self-righteousness, and we enjoy it, until we're burned out hollow. We've got to let it go.

We've got to let go of the little piece of Peter that lives inside each of us, thinking that we know best, that we can take control of life and make it turn out the way we want it to be, that we can push Jesus around when he starts going in directions we don't like. To follow Jesus faithfully, the grace of God must be in charge. Grace must take control – not suggest or nudge or guide or propose, but control.

Giving up control, that's probably the most difficult, painful part of dying to sin, because at the heart of all sin is the desire to take God's place, to pretend that we are independent of God, free to choose as we please. Now our choices do matter, a lot, but sin impairs our exercise of freedom. Sin warps our vision, clouds our minds. True freedom comes from surrender to Jesus, to let go of what we want and let him grab hold of us. With Jesus in charge, we can make better choices, for ourselves and others.

But our capacity for self-deception, we're experts, professionals, so sometimes we don't even notice when we're pretending to be the boss and have shut Jesus out of the decision-making process. That's why we need to take time to pray, alone and in the company of others, to discern what's really going on, to root out the extent to which we're fooling the face we see in the mirror every morning. That takes sacrifice.

If you work 10 hours a day, maybe 30 minutes, or 5% of that time, can be devoted to prayer. If you watch TV or go online 2 or 3 hours a night, maybe take 20 minutes, just a small fraction of that time, can be spent in prayer instead. Turn it all off, even your cell phone – yes, I've lost my mind – for 20 or 30 minutes. The world won't pass you by, but if we don't exercise that discipline, God might pass by us, and we'd be too distracted to know.

It's tough, breaking habits, making new ones, but it's more than just habit that we're struggle with. We intuitively know that prayer is dangerous. We've done it before. We know that Jesus doesn't play games, and that the only certainty with prayer is that there's no way to know what he might come up with.

And then we wonder, "Was that really Jesus, or is my own voice tempting me to sin?" Here's a hint. If you feel peace, a sense of balance and serenity, even in the midst of intense discomfort during prayer, it's most likely Jesus. And whenever you feel unsure, remember that

you're not alone. We are a community of faithful friends, and part of our commitment to God and each other is to listen and share, to seek and give wise counsel. It's not something we do with great intention, because of how vulnerable it makes us feel, but a cross is a vulnerable, exposed place to be.

Finally, when we pray, we always hope for an answer. God does, too. It's a two-way conversation, prayer. We need to answer Jesus as much as we need Jesus to answer us. And the answer Jesus wants, however we give it, basically boils down to this. I will die to the sin that's killing me, no matter how much I enjoy it, so that I will truly live in the grace that makes me ready to sacrifice, in the love that pushes all else aside, and in the suffering and blood that makes real life possible. Amen.