

Matthew 16: 21-28 “Picking Up Your Cross” Rev. Janet Chapman 9/10/23

Those of you who have been around kids know that when they wake up from nightmares, they are often traumatized. Nothing gets a kid going with the tears and fears than a good old-fashioned nightmare. But here is the problem – nightmares aren’t what they used to be, the fears that woke us up in the middle of the night are not the same as today. One 10-year-old ran into her parent’s room sobbing, “I’m scared, Mommy... I had a bad dream, Daddy. I don’t want to sleep alone.” The parents sit up and try to comfort the child, “Tell us about it. Most bad dreams aren’t real so you have nothing to worry about, sweetheart.” “That’s just it,” says the daughter, “this one could come true.” Both parents shake their heads saying, “It’s all in your mind; nightmares aren’t real. What was your dream?” Between sobs, the daughter blurts out, “I’m so scared – what if this really happens to me? I dreamt I went to school without my phone!” God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you!

Peter feels like he’s living a nightmare as he listens to Jesus in our text. Peter’s worst fears are being put to the test. Jesus tells him and the others he must die and it was going to be awful, bloody, painful, humiliating. However, Jesus doesn’t want them to be fooled. When the time comes, they shouldn’t believe Jesus’ death was some sort of horrible mistake that could have been avoided. Verse 21 describes the nightmare, “From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” This is what Jesus wanted them to know, but Peter heard only the first part, the suffering and death part, before exploding with tears and fears, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” It is hard to tell what is going on inside Peter’s head, what his real fears were. Plenty of folks say he was putting his own

agenda ahead of God's and that he should have never used God's name to challenge God's will. I prefer Barbara Brown Taylor's take on it as she thinks Peter loved Jesus and simply didn't want him to die. Jesus had done nothing wrong, didn't deserve death, and Peter didn't want to lose him. I also think death was the worst fear Peter had, and that Jesus' reference to his own death cranked Peter's fear up so high he couldn't stand it. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" Why? Because if it can happen to you, it can happen to me. It can happen to anyone, and no one is safe. If Jesus was vulnerable, so was everyone else.

A story is told about a little boy who was riding with his Grandpa in the days when seatbelts weren't required and children often rode in the front seat. Suddenly a dog ran right in front of the car and the Grandpa grabbed the boy at the same time he slammed on the brakes, but he couldn't entirely break the boy's fall. The boy's forehead banged on the dashboard just hard enough to hurt, which set off on a good five-minute howl. Once the boy had caught his breath enough to speak, he looked through his wet eyelashes at his beloved grandpa and said, "Paw-paw, what did I do wrong?" The child's loss of innocence is something we all have to suffer. We get through two or ten or 20 years of our lives believing in a universe that rewards good and punishes evil, until one day life slams on the brakes and we learn the truth: You can do everything right and still get hurt. Goodness is no protection from pain. If the ultimately good and wise Jesus, the one who most reflects God, isn't protected from suffering even unto death, then who is?

Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" And Jesus' gives his harshest rebuke in all the Gospels. "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." Jesus' use of the word

Satan tells us just how tempted he was – Peter’s suggestion that he should be spared suffering matched something deep inside of Jesus, deep inside all of us. Just look at what Jesus prays the night before he dies, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” It is Peter’s words that prod Jesus to question his calling, to rethink his purpose on earth... and it is that brief hesitation that makes Jesus respond as he does. Although Jesus feels temptation tugging at him, God counters that powerful feeling by giving him a vision of his death that isn’t all dark. A part of that vision leaks brilliant light and vibrant hope with the reference to resurrection on the third day. Jesus comes to recognize there is clearly something that lies beyond the suffering, and his job is to walk towards it instead of running away.

He tries to share that vision with his disciples, by challenging them to follow him. If they were not afraid to lose their lives, he told them, they might be surprised to find them. The image he used was a cross, which, mind you, had no religious meaning at that time. A cross was simply the method of execution preferred by the Roman government. It struck fear into people’s hearts the same way an electric chair or a lethal injection strikes fear into ours. There were days when the road to Jerusalem was lined with crosses, each bearing the dead or dying body of someone whose public execution was meant to scare everyone who saw it. Crucifixion wasn’t just an efficient form of punishment, it was an effective form of intimidation. It reinforced the mistaken idea that death was the most awful thing in the world. People with any sense should do everything in their power to avoid it. By telling his disciples to pick up their crosses, Jesus defied that idea. He suggested there were far worse things than death in the world, and that living in fear was near the top of the list. If they were going to let fear run their lives, then fear would become their god. The only standard for their behavior would become

how much something scared them or not. If it didn't scare them, they would do it. If it did, they wouldn't. And when their anxious, fearful days came to an end, for death can't be avoided forever, they would discover they had never really lived at all.

This past week, I got the privilege to meet one of the residents at the first micro-shelter transitional community in Redding, run by United Way. Incidentally, this is the first time any United Way in the nation has taken on such a venture, because it was out of their wheelhouse. It is a testament to local CEO Larry Olmstead for not letting fear of trying something new, fear of failure, decide their course of action. Such action grew contagious as people began to step up to help and 8 previously unsheltered people now call it home. One such resident, we will call her Vicki, a life-long resident of Redding (putting to rest the idea that the unsheltered aren't locals) has been on the streets for 13 years, most recently, in a forest encampment off Lake Blvd. She has 2 kids, both employed and on their own, but only one who will communicate with her; the other has written her off, ashamed of her situation. There was nothing in her history that said she deserved to be on the streets, honestly, there rarely is, that is just our misunderstanding. She couldn't keep a job because no one could be counted on regularly to watch her belongings – to leave your belongings unattended is to have them stolen before you return. Everyone is in survival mode which means you just try to make it through the next 24 hours. Working with a social worker for ages, Vicki was scared to death this would be the state of her life forever and she was ready to do anything to change it. One day she was handed an application for the Market St. microshelter community. She was accepted, and despite her excitement, she was scared. The forest had been her home for 13 years without restrictions; now she would be asked to follow basic rules and safety guidelines, she would share chores

with others, she would attend classes and work weekly with an onsite case manager to help her get and hold a job. To us, that may seem like nothing but when it has been so foreign to your daily routine, the responsibility can seem overwhelming. To boot, the entire Redding community is watching you because you are the first of your kind; they are waiting for you to stumble and fall, proving such ventures are a waste of money and time. But instead of surrendering herself to the fear, she surrendered herself to God. She denied that panic-stricken voice inside of her – the one that kept saying play it safe, don't do it – and listened instead to the voice that said, "Wake up. Follow me. Do not fear." That voice never promises safety but it always promises life. It never offers freedom from pain, only freedom from life-stifling fear. Now having been in her own microshelter for 2 months, Vicki still has fears but they don't control her. In record time, Vicki will be the first of many success stories to come as she has now been hired by Redding Parks & Rec for gate management at Enterprise Park. In lieu of a salary, she is being given one of the first 3D printed homes onsite at the park. Listening to Vicki, it occurred to me that whatever it is that scares us to death, so that we start offering to do anything to make it just go away – that is your cross, and if you leave it lying there it will kill you. If you turn away from it (God forbid it, Lord!), with the excuse that this should never have happened to you, then you deny God the chance to show you the greatest mystery of all: There in the darkness of your worst fears is the door to abundant life. I dare not say too much more than that, lest God push me more on this truth. But Jesus dares to say to all of us stop running from your cross; reach down and pick it up. It isn't nearly as scary once you get your hands on it, and no one is asking you to do it alone. Jesus encourages you and I this day, "Believe in God more than your fear, then pick it up, come with me and I will show you the way to the door."