***“No Magical Escape”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, September 12, 2021

**James 3:3–9**

3If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

**Mark 8:27–33**

27Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Have you ever said something that you later regretted? Of course you have. The tongue is a powerful member, and represents you in the public square. Most of us have learned to be diplomatic and wise in the use of our tongues. It can be a touchy and troublesome weapon, and we don’t want it to become a loose cannon, careening around the deck and destroying relationships.

James seems to be saying “how rare it is that someone controls his tongue. But if he *can* control his tongue, then with the tongue he can control his whole body, like a small rudder controls a big ship.” So we are given a stern warning about the danger of loose and thoughtless talking.

Peter engages in loose but well-meaning speech. Jesus has issued a warning that is meant to protect the apostles by making them ready for what is going to happen. Peter’s well-meaning denial of what Jesus is saying is potentially harmful to Jesus’ completing his mission, and so Jesus rebukes him. He needs Peter and the others to be realistic and to be spiritually ready. Being in denial works against that. But we can certainly sympathize with Peter. Also, we appreciate his insight that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus’ warning of his coming death is one of nine places in the Synoptic Gospels where he issues such a warning. In none of them does he say that he will have to die so that humans may be saved. In none of them does he say that he is bearing the guilt of the human race, or that his death is a sacrifice or a ransom payment. All of these ingredients of atonement theology are completely absent from these warnings. They are simple and straightforward warnings to his apostles so that they will be ready when the terrible day arrives. He wants them to be psychologically prepared so they will not be crushed by the experience. They don’t seem to get it, or perhaps they just can’t accept the terrible eventuality, so he has to repeat the warning. In the next chapter, Mark says “they did not understand what he was saying” (9:32).

They hold him in very high regard, even somewhat superstitiously, and they can’t imagine him being humiliated and killed. Peter is the one, unfortunately, who dares to put this denial into words. Jesus knows there will be no escaping the dread event. And he knows what man is capable of. He knows he will be punished and rubbed out. This has happened to many independent voices and brave religious teachers down through time, from the apostles James, Peter, and Paul, to the reformer Jan Hus, to the pastor Salim Stephen Surin killed in India last December after baptizing five converts (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/india-pastor-shot-killed-in-street-after-baptizing-new-believers.html>).

Jesus knew it was necessary that he live out his life, and endure whatever the authorities were planning for him. He did miracles on behalf of others, but he was not going to rescue himself with a miracle. *We* don’t get to miraculously escape from political violence, and neither did he. We will always remember the acts of political violence of twenty years ago. When we do, we recall our emotions of sadness and fear. We also remember the outpouring of kindness shown to Americans around the world. Basic human generosity showed itself. Spiritually, we all have the same Father who wants us to grow in understanding and eagerness to follow his will. It is this same Father who sent us a Teacher who would know us well because he lived as one of us.

Jesus knew he needed the full experience of human living. As the Epistle to the Hebrews said, “he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect” (Heb 2:17). He is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” because he was “tested as we are” (Heb 4:15). Jesus shared “flesh and blood” (Heb 2:14) with us, and that included the risk of the danger and injustice that this world can impose on people.

Jesus drank the cup of human experience, draining it to the bottom. He really was “like his brothers and sisters” in what he suffered. Fortunately, he also really can sympathize with our weaknesses. He had to put up with incomprehension from his immediate family, who so misunderstood him that they thought he was beside himself, and “they went out to restrain him” (Mark 3:21). He had to endure their ignorance until after his resurrection when, apparently, they came around (1 Cor 15:7; Acts 1:14). By living his life, Jesus learned to have patience with his apostles and his family. If he hadn’t had patience, he would never have won his family over, and we wouldn’t have the marvelous epistle of James.

Some of the truths we get from Jesus seem like timeless truths that he uttered in his preaching, such as “the truth will make you free” (John 8:32), and some truths seemed to emerge directly from his experience, such as “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders” (Mark 8:31). This was only a “truth” that emerged from the fact that the elders chose to feel threatened by him, and thus to reject him. Another painful truth emerging directly from his experience was “prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (Mark 6:4). Jesus had to have these experiences in order to live a life like we live, and in order to have compassion on us for our actual sufferings. As Hebrews said, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (4:15).

Know that Jesus knows you and knows your burdens. Call on him for spiritual help and for spiritual clarity. Sometimes the clarity can help reduce the burden, as when it lets you know that you do not need to feel guilty or afraid of God. He said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). He taught that God was merciful, just as Jesus himself was. God is a loving parent, as Jesus demonstrated. He chose the term “father” to show that God was forgiving and inviting, like the Prodigal Son’s father who is so eager to forgive and receive his wandering son back, without even needing to listen to the son’s apology speech. So, know that you are a child of God, and *trust* God like a child trusts his or her parent. Do not be afraid.