

Going My Way

In the name of him who is coming in glory and who will reward each person according to what they have done, dear friends in Christ: This morning's reading from St. Matthew's Gospel picks up right where last week's lesson left off, so a little review will help put thing in perspective. Jesus had asked his disciples what people were thinking about him, "Who do they say I am?" The disciples ran down the list: "Some think that you are John the Baptizer come back to life; others say that you are Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets." These answers were all wrong, of course, falling well short of the truth; but at least they show that the people generally understood Jesus to be a religiously important person and a true man of God.

Jesus then turned the question on his disciples, "What about you guys? Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered for the twelve, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Paraphrasing here a bit, Jesus told them yes, you're right. And you didn't figure this out on your own. This is a truth revealed to you by my Father in heaven.

This is where today's text picks up. Having arrived at the truth about *who* Jesus is, namely that he is the Christ, the long-promised Messiah and Savior of God's people, Jesus proceeds to tell them what it is that he as the Christ must do. He explains to them that he has to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. This is his Messianic mission: to give his life as the atonement for the sins of the whole world. And it's necessary that he suffer and die at the hands of the elders and the priests and the scribes. Why? Because it's precisely in fulfillment of the Lord's promises made to Israel's original elders, the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; it's in fulfillment of the priests' task of making sacrifices of atonement for the sins of the people; it's in fulfillment of all of the Scriptures which the scribes had faithfully and painstakingly transcribed and handed down through the ages. Though they would not know it when they were doing it, these men who rejected and destroyed Jesus would be actually fulfilling their roles in God's plan of salvation.

But they weren't the only ones who wouldn't understand what was really going on when it happened. Jesus' own disciples didn't get it. Even with Jesus explaining it to them in advance in the clearest possible terms, they still didn't get it. Instead they are aghast that Jesus would say such awful things. They're all thinking, "No, Jesus; what's all this talk of suffering and dying? That's not the way it's supposed to work. You've got it all wrong. The Christ is a heroic figure, a mighty conqueror. You're supposed to lead us onward and upward to great heights of glory. You won't be rejected. No, you'll be welcomed and honored by all Israel. And then you're going to raise a huge army; we, the twelve of us will be your generals, and together we'll overthrow the Romans. And then you'll set up the kingdom of God on earth. And we'll all be fabulously wealthy and live in luxury. And if anyone ever gets sick or injured or even dies, you'll fix that, just like you have been doing. Oh, Jesus, forget this dying stuff. You've got to see things our way. You've got to fulfill *our* hopes and dreams. *That's* what you're here for."

There's some biting irony here: "Jesus, you are the Christ. And you're God. But you don't know what you're talking about. So, shut up and listen to us."

They're all thinking it, but again it's Peter who acts on behalf of the disciples. He takes Jesus aside to explain things to him, as if he were a child who needs some gentle correction. And to grasp what's going on, you have to picture Peter physically turning Jesus and leading

him in a direction away from the others for this private rebuke. “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

And this is significant: before responding to Peter, the text says that Jesus turns – that is he turns back to his original course and direction. So, doing, he’s communicating a clear message. It’s this: No, I don’t follow you. And I won’t be turned aside from my mission. You get behind and follow me. You go the direction *I’m* taking you. You go my way. Your task is to follow wherever I lead.

This message is hammered home even harder by what Jesus says to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Ouch. Those words were meant to sting. And well they should. It’s the work of the devil to steer the course away from God’s plan and purpose. In attempting to turn Jesus away from the cross and God’s plan of redemption, Peter was unwittingly doing the work of Satan. Jesus was right to slam him down hard – both for Peter himself and for the benefit of the others who were watching because they were thinking the same thing and were just as guilty as Peter of wanting to turn Jesus away from his mission.

We can often recognize this same work of Satan in our lives. He can no longer interfere with Jesus or try to lead him astray from his mission to redeem us. That’s a done deal. But what he can do is attempt to lead *you* in a different direction than Jesus is leading. Jesus bids us, “Take up your cross and follow me. You go my way.” And Satan is right there saying, “But his way is hard. His way doesn’t lead to immediate rewards in the here and now; you have to wait for some promised pie-in-the-sky resurrection far, far in the future, and, let’s face it, that may never come about. No, you’ve got only one life to live, so you might as well live it up. Take the easy way. Go the way of the world. Conform yourself to society. Pursue pleasure, wealth, fame, comfort; whatever’s easiest, whatever makes you happy, whatever makes you feel good right now. Follow that path.”

A bit more subtle but just as damaging are Satan’s attempts to steer us away from Christian discipleship with distractions and excuses that keep us from prayer, devotions, Bible study, and corporate worship. We’ve got too many other things going on, or we give the common complaints: “I don’t get anything out of it”, “I know all that stuff already”, “It’s boring”, or just as likely, “It’s too hard to understand”. Such comments are like music to the devil’s ears because it means another one is going his way. Maybe some of you are familiar with *Babylon Bee*. It’s an online Christian magazine that makes its points with spoof articles. A while back I read one about a pair of Christian parents who were shocked to discover that their college age daughter had strayed from the faith. They just couldn’t understand it. After all, they had taken her to church every single Sunday that they didn’t have something more important going on – which meant that they attended services, gosh, at least once every three months. The point being, of course, that the daughter didn’t wander off on her own. She was led astray by Mom and Dad – who were doing the work of Satan.

But again, these attempts of the devil to steer us in a different direction than Jesus is leading are fairly obvious to anyone who knows to watch out for them. What’s much harder to recognize is when we take the role of Satan ourselves and attempt to steer Jesus the way we want him to go. You see, when Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about his mission to suffer, die, and rise again, at least some of his intentions were good. He would have spared Jesus all that pain and agony. Sure, in so doing, he would have left himself without a Savior from sin, but he wasn’t thinking in those terms. He was only thinking about what he thought was best for Jesus and for himself.

The problem is that he didn't know what was best. And neither do we. But we think we do. And so, it is with good intentions that we try to steer Jesus to our way of thinking. I'll give you a few examples. There is the ever-popular health and wealth gospel that teaches Jesus wants more than anything for you to be successful, happy, and overflowing with every material blessing. It's not the true Gospel of sin, grace, and God's forgiveness; it's a false gospel of rewards for simply having enough faith to believe that Jesus wants to reward you. And people who think they are following Jesus eat it up. But Jesus isn't going their way. In their minds, they've turned Jesus to their way. And in the process, they've made him into an idol, a genie who lives to grant their every wish rather than a Savior from sin.

Another example is those who think it's best to soften or change God's Law. They believe that all this talk of sin and repentance turns people off. They believe that more people will follow Jesus if we lower the bar. This last week a large group of conservative Protestants issued what's called the Nashville Statement (you may have heard about it). Against the tide of where our society is heading, it states in 14 articles what we would call basic Christian morality with regard to sex, marriage, and the family. The reaction from the liberal wing of American Christianity was swift and severe. They have condemned the statement in the strongest possible terms. The Jesus they believe they are following would never be so hateful and mean as to condemn anyone for pursuing sexual fulfillment however, with whomever, and as often as they want. Against the clear Word of God, they think they've turned Jesus their way.

Closer to home, we have in our own church body many who push for a more open communion policy. Though our reasons for practicing close communion are based squarely on the Word of God and are intended both to preserve the integrity of our confession and to lovingly protect those who might partake of the sacrament without proper faith in Jesus' words and therefore to their detriment, they see that it hurts peoples' feelings to be told they can't commune. And, well, Jesus would never want anyone's feelings to be hurt, would he?

Peter and the other disciples discovered otherwise when they tried to turn Jesus their way. He let them know in words that hurt to hear that he doesn't follow us. We follow him. Being a disciple means going his way. And that's what makes it so difficult, because the sinful nature in all of us wants to turn him aside. Deep down inside, we all want to be the leader, not the follower. At some level we all want the Jesus whose job it is to make us healthy, wealthy, and happy; we want the Jesus who is soft and indulgent of our sins; we want the Jesus who would never hurt our feelings. In other words, we want a Jesus who doesn't exist.

And to that part of us the real Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" As painful as it is to hear, it is his call to repent. It's the call to carry the cross of daily crucifying the sinful flesh that seeks its own will above that of Christ's will for us. It's the call to recognize that what we set our hearts on are not the things of God, but the things of men, and to confess our guilt before him. And in receiving his forgiveness he creates in us a renewed and clean heart, a heart set on taking up whatever other crosses he assigns and that follows him – follows him through a whole lifetime of repentance and renewal by his strengthening word of forgiveness, follows him through the sorrow and bitterness of death, follows him to the resurrection and joyful life in glory that he has promised to those who are going his way. By his Word and Spirit may he grant us both the will and the ability to stay the course and to go wherever *he* leads. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!