

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, March 10, 2024

“Wandering Heart: I'm Fixed Upon It”

The Message

When I was running my dog daycare, one thing was always inevitable.

As soon as I would start thinking to myself, “wow, things have been running really smoothly lately,” or, “maybe I do actually know what I am doing,” something bad or challenging would happen, or something would come up that I had no idea how to handle.

Every single time.

I could never get too big of an ego, because as soon as I would start to feel pretty confident, God would humble me in one way or another.

It was like whiplash, or a horrible roller coaster ride that never ended.

It feels like we've been on a roller coaster ride with Peter, too.

Today's scripture came directly on the heels of last week's scripture.

Last week, we heard Jesus ask his disciples, “who do you say that I am?” And his disciples first tell him who other people say he is – John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah, perhaps.

Jesus asks again, “who do you say that I am,” and Peter answers him that he's the Messiah.

Jesus changes his name from Simon to Peter, and then tells him he's the rock on which the church was built and gives him the keys to the kingdom.

Now this week, we hear, quite literally in the very next line, this story in which Jesus tells his disciples what was going to happen to him – that he will suffer terribly, he will be killed, and he will rise again three days later.

Then, Peter takes Jesus aside and tells him to stop talking like that.

In Peter's worldview and what he understands of the Messiah, God would not allow this to happen to the Messiah.

So Jesus rebukes him, calls him Satan, and tells him to get away from him.

What?!

What just happened??

It's like a rollercoaster ride and we just got whiplash! How does Peter go from being the rock on which Christ's church will be built, to *Satan* in a matter of a few sentences?

Well, what do we tend to do when our world unravels and our beliefs are tested?

Often, we tend to cling to what we know.

We've discussed in past weeks that Peter and the other disciples understand the concept of the Messiah from the worldview they have always known – that of the Jewish belief in the coming Messiah.

Jesus telling them that he's going to suffer, be killed, and rise again, is completely outside of their scope of understanding of what the Messiah should be and do.

So, as Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, Peter protests. Peter is fixed upon the way he thinks things should go and he resists the pain of what is to come.

At the same time, Jesus is fixed upon his calling, and he therefore calls Peter out.

For all of us, there comes a time (or maybe several times) when our faith is tested and we have to face difficult and inconvenient truths.

In these times, we may desire to take the easier path – the path with less pain or less difficulty or fewer obstacles in the way.

In these moments, we may want to cling to the easier, more simplistic answers.

But, what if instead of choosing the easier path, we welcomed complexity?

What if we were able to stay fixed upon our convictions while also opening our minds to expanding our perspective or our worldview?

This is essentially what is happening to Peter.

His worldview and his concept of the Messiah still has not caught up to where Jesus actually is.

He is essentially experiencing cognitive dissonance which occurs when a person holds two related but contradictory thoughts.

Peter just declared that Jesus is the Messiah, but he still believes that the Messiah should look and act in certain ways.

So when he sees and hears Jesus talk about things he doesn't yet believe a Messiah should have to face, he doesn't know how to handle it.

And Jesus is faced with the difficult knowledge of his own pain, suffering, death, and resurrection.

He's not in a position to have anyone question this knowledge, because even though he knows it's coming and accepts his fate, he doesn't need anyone causing him to question his call to his mission.

Between last week's scripture and this week's, we see tremendous growth on Peter's part.

He is faced with significant challenges to his worldview.

We can probably relate to this – there are people we might encounter in the world, or situations we might encounter that do not fit our expectations or our worldview at all.

When this happens, we may initially feel like Peter. We may be resistant to the newness of the concepts or the idea that there are people in the world who are very different than us.

In those moments, we might be like Peter.

We might want to pull the person aside and say “hey, what are you doing? This isn't right and I don't approve.”

We might want to fight learning about new concepts because it's outside the scope of understanding we have always known.

But Peter shows us that when we encounter something that is outside of our scope of understanding, it is possible to adjust our understanding to include the new concept or person or idea.

Jesus' response in this passage may not feel very loving toward Peter. But I would argue that Jesus feels comfortable enough to respond this way *because* he loves and trusts Peter completely.

Jesus trusts Peter enough to know that he is still struggling to understand concepts that had previously been foreign to him – or at least vastly different than what Peter was taught and what he has always known.

And he trusts him enough to rebuke him because he has such high expectations for him as the rock on which the church will be built.

Jesus trusts that Peter will be able to confront his worldview, be open to the complexity of the dissonance, and work on expanding his perception and understanding.

And because he trusts him and loves him so deeply, he gives him the space to do this.

Peter has an opportunity to learn from this, and to learn from Jesus.

It reminds me of Morgan Freeman talking about how God answers prayers in the movie *Evan Almighty*.

He says, "If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience? Or does He give them the opportunity to be patient? If they prayed for courage, does God give them courage, or does he give them opportunities to be courageous? If someone prayed for their family to be closer, do you think God zaps them with warm fuzzy feelings, or does he give them opportunities to love each other?"

Jesus was giving Peter an opportunity to choose to open his mind and expand his conception of what a Messiah should be.

Just like each time I experienced whiplash when I was running my daycare, and I would just start to feel like I knew what I was doing, God would give me opportunities to learn even more.

It often felt to me like God was just really trying to take me down a peg – or 10.

But, each challenge was a chance for me to grow as a business owner, a dog trainer, and as a person.

And, I would argue that each of these challenges set me up to become a better pastor, too, because they often helped me learn how to work better with people, and how to expand my worldview and step outside of my comfort zone.

So what can we learn from Peter, once again, today?

We experience challenges to our worldviews just like Peter did. And, we don't always handle those challenges with grace, much like Peter's initial reaction.

And yet, despite the fact that God knows we will stumble sometimes – we will question and wonder and feel uncertain, and we might even pull God aside and say “what are you doing? This is too much for me.”

And through all of it, God will not stop loving us.

God might give us opportunities to grow and expand our worldviews, but it is done out of love.

Even if in the moment it might feel to us like it's too much, or like we are being tested, or maybe even that God has given up on us.

But through all of that, God remains steadfast in his love for us, and today's lesson is a beautiful reminder of that love. Amen.

Let us pray:

Listening God, If we could attach ourselves to you, we would. We would scribble your scripture onto our tender hearts. We would weave your good news into the fiber of our being. We would bind ourselves to you, but instead, we wander. Instead of attaching ourselves to you, we find ourselves swept up in the business of the day. Like a seesaw of faithfulness, we move back and forth, up and down, constantly trying to find you in the midst of it all.

So thank you for speaking clearly to us now. Thank you for quieting the distractions long enough for us to affix ourselves to your good news. We are listening. We are hungry. We are hopeful. Amen.