



Get Behind Me, Satan

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Second Sunday in Lent~February 25, 2018*

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Psalm 22:22-30

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| 22 | May all who fear you, O God, give praise; *
may the offspring of Israel stand in awe;
all you of Jacob's line, give glory. | 26 | All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to you, *
and all the families of the nations shall bow before you. |
| 23 | For you do not despise nor abhor the poor
in their poverty;
neither do you hide your face from them; *
but when they cry to you, you hear them. | 27 | For yours is the royal power, O God; *
you rule over the nations. |
| 24 | My praise is of you in the great assembly; *
I will perform my vows in the presence of those who
worship you. | 28 | To you alone all who sleep in the earth
bow down in worship; *
all who go down to the dust fall before you. |
| 25 | The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek you shall praise you: *
"May your heart live for ever!" | 29 | My soul shall live for you;
my descendants shall serve you; *
they shall be known as yours for ever. |
| | | 30 | They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn*
the saving deeds that you have done. |

Romans 4:13-25

The promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him

who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Mark 8-31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But 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." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Get behind me, Satan.
It's a good line, isn't it?
Get behind me, Satan.

When I've used it or heard it used, it's almost always been in jest. Used to playfully rebuke temptation of some kind or another.

Get behind me, Satan.
It's such a great phrase. I find myself using it as often as I can.

But looking again at the Biblical context, I see something deeper going on here. This is a serious matter, all joking aside.

I can just imagine the conversation that ensues when Peter pulls Jesus aside.

It was probably sort of like the conversations that many of us have had after we speak a difficult truth; after we point out something others don't want to see; after we refuse to gloss over pain or struggle, after we name what's really going on in a difficult situation.

It seems to me, however, that most of the time, many of us struggle to look directly and unflinchingly at reality... especially when it isn't very pretty. Most of us are epic deniers and avoiders.

So hearing Jesus say that things aren't going to end well, just isn't what Peter wants to hear. It's not going to keep the morale of the disciples up. And it's certainly not going to help them recruit new followers. No one wants to join up with someone who's predicting his own failure and demise!

So come on, Jesus. Chin up, man. It's all gonna be okay. I'm guessing that's what Peter's rebuke sounded like. The Power of Positive Thinking, 101.

But Jesus knows where things are heading, if not in full, at least in part. He knows that his enormous popularity with the masses is going to make him unpopular with the authorities.

He knows the joyride is probably about to take a turn and get really, really complicated. There have already been signs. Jesus is just reading them.

Jesus simply refuses to lead people on. He refuses to pretend he's on anything other than a collision course with the powers and principalities. And not just the corrupt powers occupying ancient Palestine, but also the powers of cosmic evil, the forces of rebellion against all that is good and holy.

For Jesus, it was infinitely important to tell the truth. So he refused the tyranny of positive thinking, refused to offer false hope.

I'm guessing the disciples had started off with high hopes that they were following the next big name in Judean spirituality. It must have been so very thrilling to show up in a new town and be overrun by fans...to be following a man who could heal the sick and cast out demons.

How could it all end in the way Jesus was suggesting? They were doing so much good, helping so many people, offering hope to the hopeless. To imagine it all ending felt impossible, unthinkable.

So Peter told Jesus to stop. To stop it with the negative thinking. Get on with it. You're already behind on the miracle quota for the day. People need you, Jesus.

"Get behind me, Satan. Get behind me!" said Jesus Have you not yet understood? There is no winning on this journey. There is no building up of the self. There is little prestige and few accolades. This...this is the path of downward mobility.

And we still don't quite want to hear it. We still want to rebuke Jesus. Tell him that his version of things is dead wrong. We want a sunnier kind of Christianity.

Just like the disciples, "we're setting our mind not on divine things, but on human things." We're evaluating things using the wrong framework. We still don't want to believe that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Because it's hard to believe. Because we've tried so hard to be first. Because we thought winning was everything.

We want a Jesus more tolerant of our ambitions. But here comes Jesus, bursting our bubble...yet again. It's tiresome, isn't it? Irritating. Not very polite. Who does he think he is? And he keeps on doing it, because we haven't yet really heard.

God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.

God has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich God has sent away empty.

It's so painful. Because it's talking to us. About us.

Yes, there are certainly mightier and richer folk than us. But we want to be mighty and rich, don't we? I do, a lot of the time.

I want control. I want things done my way. I don't want to put up with slowness or stupidity. I want to be mighty.

I want to be comfortable. I want everything I need at my beck and call. I want only the highest quality, the best of the best. I want to be rich.

You see, it's not just about power or money. It's also about control and comfort. And ultimately, it's about trying to save our lives. These are all the things we do to try to save our lives. These are all the ways we try to outrun annihilation. These are all the buffers we build to protect us from suffering.

And ultimately, these are all the ways that we stay separate. Separate and protected. Protected from the impingement of others. Because if we let them...others will suck us dry. That's what we believe, deep down, I think.

And, yet, it is precisely in losing our lives, by opening them up to others, that we can be saved.

It is in finally releasing our fear, our tightly wound efforts at control, that we can finally walk into freedom.

Are you afraid of filth? Go and be with the dirtiest people you can find. Are you afraid of illness? Go and be with

the sickest people you can find.

Are you afraid of losing your security? Go and be with those who have no homes and those experiencing addictions.

Jesus has the perfect prescription for each one of us. Jesus can help us lose our lives. And in the process, he can and will save us.

On Ash Wednesday, Jesus started saving me again. While we were giving out ashes in the train station, a policeman came over and asked if I would pray with a young man who was suffering. He was in his third day of withdrawal from heroin. The man, just a few years older than me, stumbled over.

He asked me some questions: Why is God making me suffer so much? Why won't anyone help me? Why have I been abandoned? And finally...will you take me to the hospital? Do you think they'll help?

They were real and serious questions. I desperately wanted to have answers. I wanted to help, wanted to be useful. I told him I still had another hour of ashing commuters. So he'd have to wait.

O God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He went back to the bench where he had been sitting. And then the most terrible sound filled the station. The sound of a profound and painful effusion of vomit. He released what must've been a gallon of liquid onto the tiled floor. And I gagged in response, barely able to continue my task.

A custodian was the first on the scene. Then eventually some police. A long conversation ensued. They'd take him somewhere. I was sure of it. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to do anything after all. That I wouldn't have to go near the vomit, or the desperation.

But soon enough, the police left. But he hadn't gone with them. I stared in disbelief. Why didn't he go?

Eventually, he came back over to us. He wanted something to eat. I asked if he thought he could hold it down. A parishioner went to get him the bagel and water he requested, and threw in a banana for good measure. He sat back down to eat.

I was getting nervous. What if he vomited more in the cab? What if he started acting unpredictably or embarrassingly? What if we couldn't get help? How could I help him and get to church in time for the Noon service? What would Jesus do?

Well, what I'll tell you is that grasping his dirty, rough, scarred hand required a deep breath. Shuffling together down the station concourse, arm in arm, while he talked about demons, took more deep breaths. The cab ride took all the breaths.

But then we sat. Sat together for two hours in the Hahnemann ER waiting room. I went to 7-11 for some food. And we drank our Gatorade and ate some cookies together.

He told me about his life. About the pain. About Kensington. About the little faith he could still claim. He made some jokes. Good ones.

He asked me if he was going to make it. I told him it seemed as if something inside him didn't want to die yet. I told him that if he could hold on for a couple more days, things might seem a little less terrible. I don't know if I was telling the truth.

He asked me why no one could look at him. Why no one_ever_looked at him.

I told him that I think people are scared of addicts. Scared because they feel like they can't do anything.

I didn't tell him that I was scared. Didn't tell him how much I had wanted to leave the station without him.

I didn't because I had stopped being scared. We were two guys in our mid 30s eating snacks. And waiting, of course. Waiting with just a shred of hope.

At some point I had to leave, to get to church on time. I didn't really want to. Because he was carrying such a heavy cross. And I found myself wanting to help him bear the load. I wanted to scream over and over:

Get behind us, Satan.

Get behind us, Satan.

Get behind us.

Instead, I told him I loved him. I meant it. I told him I hoped he'd keep on living.

"Living," he replied wistfully. "I haven't really don't much of that." "It sounds nice."

"It sounds really nice," I agreed. "Really, really nice."

Amen.