

“The Way of the Cross”

“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” (Mark 8:31-32).

Two years ago, we went to Disney World on a once-in-a-lifetime trip. Not only did we do all of the things you would expect to do at Disney, we also had a personal guide accompany us. Our guide’s name was Kevin from Kalispell, Montana. He met us in the morning outside of our hotel where we piled into his official Disney van and proceeded to the park...but not in the traditional way. Instead of walking through the main gate with the masses, Kevin took the service roads hidden from public view and quickly, we were seeing the backside of the rides and restaurants, shops and shows that line the thoroughfares of the park. We pulled into a parking lot that could’ve easily doubled for the back lot of any strip mall in America. We unloaded and, as we followed Kevin through a maze of nondescript sidewalks, the sounds of the park grew louder. Suddenly, we were walking through a hidden entrance that deposited us deep in the park.

In addition to bypassing the long lines, Kevin showed us all kinds of things that the public never sees. He revealed shortcuts through the park, told us where to sit in the shows, and gave us tips on what food to order. He also told us all kinds of things about how Disney operated behind the scenes, from the way they maintain the park to their extensive emergency services. This discussion led to a question about accidents and what happens when someone dies in the park. Without batting an eye, Kevin from Kalispell quickly responded, “No one ever dies at Disney.”

Nearly 50 million people visit Disney World each year. On any given day, there are 75,000 people in the Magic Kingdom alone. There are thousands of employees and many of them do dangerous jobs. Considering all of this, it seemed impossible that no one had ever died at Disney, so we challenged Kevin on his claim. He then continued by telling us that Disney has an agreement with the local municipality that no one is ever declared dead on grounds of Disney World. Instead, when someone dies in the park, the body is quickly taken to an offsite hospital where the official pronouncement of death is made. Thus, no one dies at Disney.

This information about the “happiest place on earth” may seem odd and even a bit troubling, but the denial of death is not unique to Disney World. We are all averse to death. For that matter, nobody enjoys illness. No one in their right mind seeks out suffering. In fact, not too many people look forward to spending time in a hospital or visiting a funeral home, and often, our response to these inevitable experiences is simply to walk the other way.

The truth is, we are hardwired to avoid suffering, and in today’s reading from Mark 8 we see this natural tendency very clearly. In this reading, Jesus reveals His purpose for coming. In fact, He tells His disciples in plain language, *exactly* what is going to happen to him. This is no parable. He is not using veiled words or figures of speech. Instead, in a very straightforward way Jesus tells them the awful truth about what He will face when they go to Jerusalem. Mark writes, “And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed...And he said this plainly.” In what must have been a difficult admission for Jesus to make, He revealed to His disciples the way of the Cross.

Then, as Mark explains, almost before Jesus has stopped speaking, Peter steps in – not to ask a caring question or to offer a statement of support – Peter pulls Jesus aside to “rebuke” him. If you look up synonyms for the term “rebuke” you find words and phrases like “reprimand,” “admonish,” “scold,” “chew out,” or “tell off.” Imagine this! The same disciple who, earlier in the reading, made a bold confession that Jesus was “the Christ” now stands in front of Him to scold Him. The arrogance of Peter’s rebuke makes us squirm in our seats, but Peter only says what the other disciples must have been thinking...and his words give expression to our thoughts as well.

The truth is we are just like Peter, and we do whatever we can to avoid the way of the Cross. We don't like to suffer! In fact, we go to great lengths to avoid pain and difficulty in our lives. We surround and distract ourselves with stuff. We look for ways take our minds off of the sin that hides just beneath the surface. Rather than face the reality of family problems or moral failures, we focus on entertainment or we throw ourselves into our work. The specifics in this equation are different for each one of us, but the truth is, we all look for ways to divert our attention from the presence and consequences of our sin. To put it simply, we avoid the way of the Cross.

As we read in Mark, Jesus reacts to Peter's misguided rebuke with some harsh words of His own. Making no attempt to disguise His disapproval from the rest of the disciples, Jesus attacks Peter's sinful thinking with words that must have cut deep: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Mark 8:33). In these words Jesus spoke not only to Peter's avoidance of the Cross, but here he also destroys the comfort-driven thinking to which we all cling.

In our attempts to circumvent the implications of our sin, we often put our efforts and energy into the way of the world; and we deny the truth of our sins; and we avoid the way of the cross. We roll our eyes at Paul's instructions in Romans to "rejoice in our sufferings" and we restlessly look forward to the next distraction. To these sinful attitudes – to our sinful attitudes – Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!"

The difficult truth of this sinful world is that people do die at Disney and we *will* suffer. We will be frustrated by our failures in this life. We will let others down. We will get sick. We will struggle in our relationships. And ultimately, we will all face death. These are realities that will touch every human being. They cannot be avoided! They cannot be denied! And that is why Jesus rebukes Peter. Peter wants Jesus to be a Messiah without a Cross, but there are no short cuts. Sin must be punished. In today's reading, Jesus asks the question, "what can a man give in return for his soul?" And the resounding answer from God's Word to that important question is "nothing!" There is nothing we can give. There is nothing we can do.

And the life-giving, lifesaving truth of Lent is that *Christ has done it for us!* That is what the Cross means. There, the Son of God exchanged the power of heavenly glory for the weakness of human flesh. He exchanged His righteousness for our wickedness. He exchanged His innocence for our guilt. Jesus Christ exchanged His life for the death we deserved and there, on the Cross, sin was punished. Jesus went to the Cross for us, not because we deserved it, not because we earned it, but because He loved us! In today's reading from Romans Paul writes, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners (when we were enemies of God), Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And because Christ chose the way of the Cross, our sins have been forgiven. Because Christ chose the way of the Cross, we have life and we can now carry our crosses as His followers in this world.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is talking to His disciples. He is talking to a group of men facing a future in which they will suffer for the sake of Christ. Each of these men is facing the way of Cross and Jesus speaks to them, not threaten them or rebuke them, but to encourage them that in their suffering for sake of the Cross, He will be with them. And He will be with us as well. Jesus knows we will suffer, and He wants us to know that in our suffering He is present. In the hospital room of a dying man, Christ is present. In the tattered aftermath of a broken relationship, Christ is present. In the daily struggle against chronic illness, Christ is present. In the frustration of addiction, Christ is present. In the emptiness of grief, Christ is present.

Jesus Christ was present for us on the Cross, and He is present with us in our suffering. We are always inclined to deny the way of the Cross, but this is exactly the way that Christ chose and there, He gave His life so that we could live forever. The world tells us to deny our sin and avoid the way of the Cross, but because Christ took our punishment, we can face the truth of who we are, we can confess our sins and receive complete forgiveness, and we can rejoice in our sufferings, because we have been given a hope that will not disappoint us. Amen.

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