

**And On the Third Day**

David Orendorff    Matthew 16:21-23    August 28, 2005

Jesus and Peter come very close to blows. Let there be no mistake, Peter started it. He hears something in Jesus' teaching that he cannot stand. He grabs Jesus and scolds him, telling him he doesn't know what he is talking about. He calls upon God to stop Jesus and to prevent this thing from happening. Peter would call off the trip to Jerusalem and the crucifixion. There has to be a better way. It cannot be necessary that Jesus the Christ must suffer and die.

What Peter heard that set him off is that his life was wasted. Just a few hours ago he had been the "rock upon which Jesus would build his church," and now he was the accomplice of a dead man. A few hours ago the world was going to be saved, there would be no more tears, no more gnashing of teeth, no more death, and now he was the honor guard of beggars and would be killed. Everything he had counted on in Jesus, his only real hope for a future, Israel's only hope, was headed to Jerusalem to suffer and die.

It was a devastating moment. It was as if after your annual check up the doctor's office had called and said the doctor would like to see you. And the doctor says, "We suspect cancer." Or it was as if a phone call had come in the middle of the night, and you were warm and safe in your bed and the officer says, "There has been an accident." From such a moment the future goes black and the heart turns to a stone cold with fear.

And to make things worse Jesus has just said that not only can it happen, but that "it is necessary." What Peter has heard is that there is no hope for his life. This one sentence of Jesus' teaching spells doom for the world. The safest place ever, Jerusalem, the city of shalom, Yahweh's city, and the safest people ever, the ones who hold and guard the mysteries of God, are now the battleground and the enemy.

Think of Bear Creek UMC as Jerusalem; after all one of our tightly held values is safety. And think of the leadership here as the temple staff, as your servants they are to make you safe. Then I say this to you, "It is necessary that you go to Bear Creek and there suffer many things from the Church Council, your pastor, your small group leader, and then be killed.

Maybe you are just visiting and hope for safe treatment from Bear Creek. Or maybe you have suffered here and been killed and no longer expect safety from us.

Or for those of you who love the symphony orchestra or choral, it would be as if I said to you, "It is necessary for you to go to the symphony and there suffer many things by the conductor, director and concertmaster and be killed.

Or maybe you are a student and I say to you, "It is necessary for you to go to the university where you will suffer many things by the Dean, the student council and your advisor, and then be killed" (Although this begins to sound exactly like what I remember of the University of Wyoming.)

Or maybe you are ill and I say to you, "It is necessary that you go to the hospital to suffer many things by the doctors, the nurses and the custodian and then be killed."

However it is said, it is a horrible thought and it seems absurd. We know someplace in our minds that these things can happen, but are they really "necessary." Is it really necessary that the places and people of safety become the places and people of suffering and death. It shows to the disciples and to us that there is no safe place in all the world nor are there any safe people. And even worse, it says that in fact God plans for us to suffer and die in Jerusalem at the hands of those entrusted with our lives and our souls.

What Peter hears is that in a few years he will be crucified, hanging upside down until he dies, and try as he might he cannot escape the suffering and death because it is necessary. What Peter hears is that the followers of Jesus will be tortured, burned, beheaded, and fed to lions. What Peter hears is that disease will travel the earth, and people will die of typhus, polio, tuberculosis, cancer, aids and heart disease; that earthquakes, floods, famine and fires will ravage cities and kill millions. What Peter hears is that the wars will not end, that Christians will murder Christians, that slavery will not end, that child abuse will not end; that all the suffering he can imagine will be in life until it kills him and all humanity. And that "it is necessary."

It is a truly horrible thought and Peter rightly screams "NO!" It cannot be true. God won't let this be true. There must be someplace in life that is safe. There must be someone in life we can trust.

And so he grabs Jesus and scolds him, shouting at him, "God forbid it, Lord! This can't happen to you." And he thinks, "This cannot happen to me or to my children and their children. God this cannot be."

And Jesus responds just as passionately, twisting from Peter's grip, telling Peter that he is not the teacher and to get out of his way. He calls him Satan, God's great opponent. It is pretty harsh stuff between friends.

What is it that gains "the rock" such a searing scolding? What does he miss that Jesus is so angry? Peter just wants the suffering and death to end. Is that too much?

Peter cannot accept the truth that life, whether we like it or not, has suffering and death. But this is not the end of the truth Jesus would tell Peter and all the disciples. In his fear Peter misses seven words, seven words upon which hang our lives and our hope. Only seven words make all the difference in today and tomorrow for Peter and for all the world. These words are the words of a God that both loves us and comes to us in mercy and in healing. God will not let suffering and death end the sentence of humankind. And because this is true it is necessary for God to act. Peter misses Jesus saying, "and on the third day be raised." On the third day, God raises every child to grace, to heaven, to peace, to wholeness, to joy.

When the staff of Bear Creek has made you suffer, killed something precious in you, "on the third day you shall be raised." And on the day of your resurrection you will know that God loves you no matter what we are here.

When you have been to the symphony, served as a section leader, assisted the board and been vilified, on the third day you shall be raised and your friends will sit in the audience and shall watch you and shall point to you, and cheer you because they love you.

When you have gone to the university, and there been made fool by rules and facts that make no sense; and the peculiar and unfortunate habits of grad-students pretending to teach, and your financial aid is all messed up, and they won't give you work study, and you are eating peanut butter as if it were caviar, on the third day you shall be raised and a true professor will open to you a new heaven and a new earth, and joy will be yours.

And when you have fought cancer for years, and have suffered in hospitals at the hands of doctors and tests and chemotherapy and radiation and surgery and there is no part of you left to be tortured and humiliated, on the third day shall come a peace that cares not for life, or for death. On that day you shall rest in love whose profundity is speechless and timeless. And whether you live or die, you are raised.

And when thousands die in an earthquake and half a million are left with no home, and the suffering seems endless, on the third day shall come men and women from around the

world to find the survivors, to bury the dead. They shall carry medicine, food, water, and blankets, to offer comfort and hope where there was no comfort and no hope. And on that day you shall be there with your prayers and with your aid, for those who came, came from you and you shall be raised.

And when the war comes and the innocents die with the demons, and brave men do not come home, on the third day peace will be made. On that day a general named George Marshall, shall convince the victorious nations to build what they have just destroyed and what would have destroyed them, and the world shall be raised.

And when slavery has broken the neck of generations and many would choose to die before for ever suffering, on the third shall come an Harriet Tubman, an Abraham Lincoln, a Rosa Parks, a Martin Luther King, Jr. and a Bishop Tutu who will have God given dreams of such freedom and power that the yoke shall be broken and the bent over made straight.

And when there is abuse and violence in the home, and everyone has lost hope for the children, on the third day will come a lover to save the children as a foster parent, or a social worker.

This is what Peter misses. Peter, in that moment, has missed the love of God. He has forgotten that no matter what happens in this life, he, Peter, comes from God, is held by God, and shall always return to God. When fear took his heart he forgot God. He was so frightened for Jesus, for himself and for us, that he blocks Jesus' way to Jerusalem. He shouts, "It cannot be necessary. It must not happen." Because he missed "and on the third day be raised," Peter became Jesus' enemy and Jesus called him such.

When our minds race to the tragedies before our lives; when we lose hope that any good can come of today and we fear tomorrow; when we stand angrily before God and say, "God forbid this, it shall not happen"; when we have missed "and on the third day be raised" we become the enemy of God and there is no hope in us.

When we are told, "It might be cancer" or "There has been an accident" it is easy to be Peter and it is hard to have the faith of Jesus that God is in even this.

In 2000 I was having a very hard time in my life so I took a ten day retreat of solitude and spiritual direction. For those ten days I very occasionally spoke to others on the retreat, maybe a total of a hundred words. Daily I spoke with Sister Nancy, my spiritual director, but for no more than an hour, often much less. The rest of the time I read scripture, prayed, meditated, and walked in the woods. I am embarrassed by what I am about to tell you for in my time of solitude with God I discovered something about my faith that pained me.

It came the first time I prayed with scripture. Sister Nancy asked me to read the beginning of Mark's gospel and then pray with a blank mind and an open heart. Mark's Gospel is my favorite so I was eager to read the words, "This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way."

I closed my eyes, cleared my mind and opened my heart. I waited not knowing what I would hear or see. I began to see a movie in my head and this is how I recorded it in my journal:

*I saw myself on a Palestinian street, and a voice told me a messenger was being sent to announce the good news of Jesus. I recognized fear in myself, fear of being asked to do something I couldn't (or didn't want) to do, fear of change, fear of poverty, of suffering. I was suddenly a woman gathering her children and taking them quickly to safety. There was no clear image of where we were going, only that I gathered them and ran from the good news of*

*God.*

For two days I hid in my prayers from Jesus, I would follow at a distance, never fully committing myself. For three more days Jesus lead me reluctantly through the hell of my partial faith. I faced my fears of abandonment; my fears of commitment, my anger at those whom I perceived had betrayed me. I had nightmares and visions that frightened me. And as I meditated on this I discovered it was true, I was afraid of life, and I was afraid of death, and I was afraid to hang my trust on Jesus, on God, on the people that loved me. I was holding a part of myself in hiding just in case the whole God thing didn't work. I was afraid. I was Peter who had grabbed Jesus and scolding him was saying, "It does not have to be this way. It is not necessary, and if it turns ugly then I am out of here."

On the fifth day Sister Nancy assigned me Mark's story of Bartimaeus. You remember how Bartimaeus is a blind beggar sitting by the road out of Jericho and when Jesus comes he cries "Lord, have mercy on me." And the crowd tells him to be quiet, but he cries all the louder, "Lord, have mercy on me." And then Jesus sends for him and asks him, "What do you want?" And Bartimaeus says, "Lord, I want to see." And Jesus says, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus.

When I prayed this scripture I became blind Bartimaeus. I shouted for Jesus' mercy. The crowd hushed me. I cried again and I was taken to Jesus. He asked me, "What do you want?"

And I think in myself, after facing my blindness for five days without the diversions of work, or garden, or family, or sailing that I want to see with the eyes of faith. After five days of being confronted with where I have wounded those I most love by my partial love of them, I want to see the love of God, I want to see Jesus and I want to believe with the whole of my heart so that the love I give to my family and the love I give to you is complete, not partial, is open and not hidden, is enthusiastic and not reluctant. And I know that at this moment in my life, my faith shall not heal my sight, and that unless I am healed I shall always be blind.

And so I say to Jesus with the whole of my mind, heart and strength, "I want to see." Suddenly Jesus strikes me and knocks me to the ground. I get up and Jesus says again, "What do you want?" And again I say, "I want to see." And he knocks me down again. And I get up again. And Jesus says to me, "What do you want?" and I say, "I want to see." And a third time Jesus knocks me to the ground.

But this time I do not get up. How can I see if he will not heal me? What must I do? What must I ask? How can I be made whole, made love? I lay there and I say to Jesus, "What do you want?" And he says, "I want you to stand up." And I hear in his words that he wants me to stand up with my faith, to no matter what, trust my whole being to his love. And so I stand up and I can see. And my fear is gone. It is the third day and I have been raised.

My friends, do not wait to be knocked down by Jesus. I want for you what has been given to me. I want you to have the power to stand up to life, to stand up to suffering, to stand to your fears, to stand up to death. I want for you to come from a hiding faith, a partial faith, a reluctant love. I want for you the courage of faith that knows God raises the dead. I want for you to be able to say with the whole of your mind, heart and strength that you love your spouse, your partner, your child, you co-workers, your life. I want for you to know what Peter found in the resurrection, that God is love and will never leave you, will always come to you in the darkest moment and save you. Our end is not life's suffering and death. Our end and our beginning come when we live the good news that "on the third you shall be raised." We go to Jerusalem without fear when we hear Jesus say, "and on the third day" and before he has finished we say, "We shall be raised." Amen and Shalom.