

SERMON NOTES 3.10.24 | Rev. Arlo

Matthew 4

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 16:21-23

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance¹ to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

A police officer and a runaway convict meet in a dark alley. The escaped convict performs an act of mercy and protection for the officer. It shocks the officer to his very core. All of his life he has dedicated himself to the law. All his life he was confident there were two types of people; those who followed the law and G-d and those who had fallen from grace. But in that moment everything was challenged. The police officer's name was Javert and the convicts Jean Valjean

“Javert...walked with drooping head for the first time in his life, and likewise, for the first time in his life, with his hands behind his back...Now, a change had taken place; his whole person, slow and sombre, was stamped with anxiety...

A novelty, a revolution, a catastrophe had just taken place in the depths of his being; and he had something upon which to examine himself.

Javert was undergoing horrible suffering.

For several hours, Javert had ceased to be simple. He was troubled; that brain, so limpid in its blindness, had lost its transparency; that crystal was clouded. Javert felt duty divided within his conscience, and he could not conceal the fact from himself...

He beheld before him two paths, both equally straight, but he beheld two; and that terrified him; him, who had never in all his life known more than one straight line. And, the poignant anguish lay in this, that the two paths were contrary to each other. One of these straight lines excluded the other. Which of the two was the true one?

His situation was indescribable...

One thing had amazed him,—this was that Jean Valjean should have done him a favor, and one thing petrified him,—that he, Javert, should have done Jean Valjean a favor...

Jean Valjean was the load which weighed upon his spirit...Javert felt that something terrible was penetrating his soul—admiration for a convict. Respect for a galley-slave—is that a possible thing? He shuddered at it, yet could not escape from it. In vain did he struggle, he was reduced to confess, in his inmost heart, the sublimity of that wretch. This was odious.

A benevolent malefactor, merciful, gentle, helpful, clement, a convict, returning good for evil, giving back pardon for hatred, preferring pity to vengeance, preferring to ruin himself rather than to ruin his enemy, saving him who had smitten him, kneeling on the heights of virtue, more nearly akin to an angel than to a man. Javert was constrained to admit to himself that this monster existed.

...His supreme anguish was the loss of certainty. He felt that he had been uprooted... the possibility of a tear in the eye of the law, no one knows what justice according to God, running in inverse sense to justice according to men. He perceived amid the shadows the terrible rising of an unknown moral sun; it horrified and dazzled him

...This new chief, God, he became unexpectedly conscious of, and he felt embarrassed by him. This unforeseen presence threw him off his bearings; he did not know what to do with this superior, he, who was not ignorant of the fact that

the subordinate is bound always to bow, that he must not disobey, nor find fault, nor discuss, and that, in the presence of a superior who amazes him too greatly, the inferior has no other resource than that of handing in his resignation.

But how was he to set about handing in his resignation to God?"

From Victor Hugo's Classic Les Misérables.

Javert was wrong and he was mortified, embarrassed and confused; he had been so confident that he was right. He couldn't imagine a world where a convict could teach him about G-d; the world was turned upside down. But he had been so so wrong, so far from G-d's plan and goodness and now he wants to turn his resignation into G-d. I am sure that Peter felt the same way. Peter's world turning upside down to hear that his Messiah was to suffer and die. To be overwhelmed with G-d's plan being so much greater than ours.

Last week we heard about Peter recognizing and naming Christ as the Messiah; the Son of G-d. Christ called him The Rock on which he would build the Church. And then we come today's text, which follows directly after last week's text. And Peter goes from the Rock on which Christ will build the church to a stumbling block and Satan... We have all had moments where we have done the right thing, moments where we couldn't have been prouder of ourselves for getting it right. And we all have had moments of being humbled and realizing how wrong we were.

For most of us they don't take place in the same conversation, but for Peter they did. A friend and mentor of mine if Rev. Jin S. Kim, in Feasting on the Word he writes;

"We have to hand it to Peter! How many of us would have the audacity to rebuke Jesus? Having just been given the 'keys to the kingdom' with the power to bind and to loose (v.19), Peter seeks to use his newfound sense of authority to bind Jesus! He clearly has a certain narrative in his mind about what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, and Jesus is suddenly going off script. The Messiah is supposed to come and restore the Jewish kingdom by overthrowing oppressive empires, but now Jesus is talking about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. So Peter steps in to correct and save him: 'G-d forbid it, Lord!' With my new authority I will not let you and the promise of the coming kingdom be destroyed! How could the Anointed One be tainted by suffering and death?"

It is easy to shake our heads in disbelief at Peter, but has this not been the struggle of the church throughout history?...The tables have turned. Peter is attempting to protect Jesus in order to protect himself, but Jesus makes clear he

is living into and reinterpreting his identity as Messiah by suffering and dying with his people...

We do not control G-d or give Jesus the conditions to our discipleship; instead, we risk contamination and insecurity by releasing the need to protect our own lives and institutions...into solidarity with Jesus' own way of life in this world. Instead of binding Jesus for our own self-preservation, the church must faithfully follow and bear witness to him, 'even at the risk of losing its life.' It is precisely in participating in this way of Christ's body in the world that we find ourselves being resurrected to new life."

Peter had to be put in his place. But the beautiful thing about Simon Peter is that this is not the end of his story. At the start of this sermon, we learned about Javert the policeman's struggle with being so wrong. And what is devastating is that he can't get past being wrong. He decides to turn his resignation into G-d and decides to do that by taking his own life. What a beautiful story it could have been if Javert could have taken the correction from G-d and together with Jean Valjean they bore witness to G-d's goodness.

Last week, while learning about Peter's success in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, we also learned about Megan Rohr Phelps and her family. The Phelps family is famous for their horrific acts 'in the name of G-d.' Acts like picketing the funerals of soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan or Iraq, Matthew Shepherd...In her book Unfollow Megan receives a wake-up call and has to come to terms with the mistakes she's made and the harm she has caused. Now it would be easy to completely write off the Phelps family. It is pretty clear to almost everyone that what the Phelps family does is wrong. But it is worth noting that Fred Phelps, the former leader of that Church once also started on the mountain top like Peter did.

Fred Phelps was originally a civil rights lawyer, and he was originally respected and held in high esteem in Kansas by the local black communities. His daughter Shirley Phelps-Roper (Megan's Mom) once stated; "We took on the Jim Crow establishment, and Kansas did not take that sitting down. They used to shoot our car windows out, screaming we were n...(word) lovers." She added that the Phelps law firm made up one-third of the state's federal docket of civil rights cases. They were the lawyers for Johnson vs. Topeka Board of Education which was a lawsuit in 1973 on behalf of a 10 year old African American plaintiff named Evelyn Renee Johnson and demonstrated that Topeka was in violation of the 1954 ruling that schools had to be equal.

But then he turned his Church into a hate group which the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as, "the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in

America.” A group known for their signs that read, “G-d hates...”and then some group of people. This is what Fred Phelps’s granddaughter had to come to terms with. Megan recognizes how like Peter they wanted G-d to follow their agenda of hate instead of G-d’s plan of love. In her book she writes,

“I stared intently at the basement wall as I moved the brush over the deep purple stripes we were meant to cover. I watched the bristles leave their trails of wet paint, but no matter how thickly I coated the brush or how many times I went over it- again and again and again- the darkness was still visible underneath. My mind spun through its familiar circuits, the same objections and doubts that had been brewing for over a year, grasping for something that would return order to the chaos. The futility of it all had been a heaviness in my mind for months, but it had taken on a physical dimension now, and it was suffocating- the dank chill of the basement and the shadows cast in the dim light and the impossible melancholy of the notes seeping out of the stereo. The weight of my arms and of the paintbrush seemed to grow with each stroke until I could hardly bring myself to lift them. An insurmountable burden...

My arm continued to drag the paintbrush up and down, but my pulse and thoughts were racing. *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.* I couldn’t believe how our love within the church had been wrapped beyond recognition by the elder’s unscriptural will to punish. By their implacable demands for unquestioning obedience. By their pernicious need for superiority and control. They had developed a toxic sense of certainty in their own righteousness, seizing for themselves the role of the ultimate arbiter of divine truth- and they now seemed willing to lay waste to anyone who disagreed with them. It was a heinous arrogance and sinfulness that could not be denied.

And in a moment of horrifying clarity, I finally saw what had eluded me for so long:

We had *all* been behaving in the exact same way toward outsiders. It was as if we were finally doing it to ourselves what we had been doing to others-*for over twenty years.*

My eyes widened and my face flushed hot, overtaken by panic and shame and regret and humiliation in the split second it took my mind to find a way to make sense of the chaos that the church has become:

What if we’re wrong? What if this isn’t The Place led by G-d himself? What if we’re just people?

And I felt sure that it was all true.

I crossed a chasm in that split second, pursuing a thought my mind had never truly imagined and now could never take back. With stark clarity I understood that whether the church was wrong or right, I was a monster. If we were wrong, then I had spent every day of my life industrious sowing doom, discord, and rage to so many- not at the behest of G-d, but of my grandfather. I had wasted my life only to fill others with pain and misery. And if the church was right? Then asking those questions and even *beginning* to consider their implications was an unforgivable betrayal of everyone I had ever loved and the ideals I'd dedicated my life to defending. In my mind, I was a betrayal already. I thought of my mother, and the guilt was crippling. I didn't deserve to be part of this body of believers. The Lord was done with me...Already condemned. Overwhelmed by a sudden pressing need to leave *that instance*, every part of my body hummed with a single vicious accusation: *you don't belong*.

My eyes squeezed shut, my whole face twisting instantly into desperate sobs that I tried to suffocate by cutting off the air to my lungs. In the span of a few seconds, my world had disintegrated, slipping through my fingers like so much sand."

But unlike Javert, Megan's life didn't end when she had to come to grips with her mistakes. Megan's story didn't end in that basement. She wrote a book exposing her family's "church" for what it was. And she has done some amazing advocacy and reconciliation work. And Simon Peter's journey with Christ didn't end after Jesus called him Satan.

And when we mess up, our story doesn't end there either. Sometimes we think we have it right and we are embolden by our confidence and arrogance. But when we are wrong, we can find solace that it doesn't mean our journey with Christ ends. It might be hard and uncomfortable and humbling and embarrassing but if we can admit our faults and let go of our agendas it and return to Christ we bear witness to G-d's goodness and grace. Someone whose name we no longer know once stated, "Grace means all your mistakes now serve a purpose instead of serving shame."

Thanks be to G-d