

Lent 2B 28 February 2021  
Mark 8:31-38  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*And Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! Let's pray:*

The more time I spend reflecting on my life, and the more honest I am with myself, the more I realise that the things I say, do, and think with regard to others, are more about me than they are the other person. I think that's true for Peter in today's gospel. His reaction to Jesus says a lot more about Peter than it does Jesus.

It's not too difficult to understand what's going on with Peter. He feels scared and unprepared for what's coming. Life sometimes does that to us. I imagine Peter thinking to himself, "When I signed up to fish for people, this isn't what I had in mind. Great suffering, rejection, death; that's not what I signed up for. What's going on?" Sometimes life throws stuff at us we didn't sign up for. It takes us places we never wanted to go. I suspect Peter is struggling with his faith, trying to make sense of what he really believes, wondering if he has what it takes to meet the demands of what Jesus says must happen.

We know what that's like, don't we? We've stood next to Peter and looked down the road at what was coming and didn't like what we saw. We wanted to cry out, "No. This isn't happening. This can't be." Haven't there been times when you felt scared or overwhelmed by life? Haven't there been times when you just didn't want to face the day? Haven't there been times when you just didn't know whether your faith was up to the demands of life? Love my enemy? Forgive not once, but seventy times seven? Turn the other cheek when the first is still red and stinging?

Imagine taking a snapshot of your life in that moment. Would you like what you see? Would you frame and keep it, or throw it away? I'm often at my worst at those times and I don't like those pictures of my life. And I'll bet you don't either. They're the kind of pictures we'd delete from the album of our life if we could. We certainly wouldn't want anyone else to see them.

But there's more to us than one picture can show. We're too quick to see that one moment in time as descriptive and representative of who we are and what our life's like. We take that one photograph of ourselves and say, "This is me. This is my life. This is all there'll ever be." We use that picture as a final judgement of ourselves. And sometimes, we take those kind of photographs and hold them up to others and say, "Look what you did. This is who you are. This is how I will always see you."

But can a single snapshot tell the whole story? No. Life is more like a movie that's active, dynamic, changing, and unpredictable. There's more to Peter than the snapshot we're given in today's gospel and there's more to you and me than those snapshots we want to rip out of our album. Every moment exists within a larger story. That's true for Peter and it's true for you and me.

Today's gospel is just one snapshot of Peter. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Jesus turns and rebukes Peter and calls him Satan. "You're the deceiver, the adversary, the tempter. You're out of line, Peter. Get behind me." Do we really believe that one picture is all there is to Peter? Surely not. Only four verses earlier Peter confesses, "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:29). Two very different pictures of the same man.

Remember the day Peter walked on the Sea of Galilee toward Jesus? That's a picture worth hanging on the wall. But if you took another picture just moments later, you'd see Peter frightened, sinking, crying out for help, and Jesus saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:28-31).

Or how about the picture of Peter as the rock on which Jesus will build the church (Matthew 16:18)? Set that one next to the picture of the cock crowing Peter's three denials of Jesus (Mark 14:66-72).

I'm sure Peter would like to lose that snapshot of him sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prayed and being awakened by Jesus' question, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). Compare that picture to the one of Jesus saying to Peter, "Feed my lambs.... Tend my sheep.... Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

It's not just Peter who has contradictory pictures in his life. Remember the man who brings to Jesus his demon possessed child and Jesus tells him that all things are possible for the one who believes? The same man declares, "I

believe;” immediately followed by... “help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:23-25). Who among us hasn’t seen those two pictures in our life?

What about Mary, the mother of Jesus? “How can this be?” she asks when the angel announces her pregnancy. And then a little later she says, “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:26-38).

Jesus also experienced this. Compare two snapshots of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36): “Father... remove this cup from me,” and “not what I want, but what you want.” Look at the different snapshots of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) and “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

We all have those contrasting pictures in our life, but sadly, we tend to identify with the bad picture days of our life. So often, people come to me and describe their life as a single picture. They describe themselves through a particular event, which is fine, but then they make the leap that that description is all they are, and all their life will ever be. They allow that one snapshot in time to stand as a final judgement.

But what if there’s always more to that picture than what we see? It’d be so easy to look at the snapshot of Peter in today’s gospel and say that he just blew it. Just a near-sighted, unfaithful disciple, who was out of line rebuking Jesus.

What if Jesus’ rebuke of Peter, the sting of being called Satan, is really just Jesus saying, “Peter, that’s not who you are. I know you. You’re more than what you’ve become in this moment. Wake up. Claim your belovedness. Trust my call to discipleship.”

Every picture has more than one interpretation. We can look at those snapshots of our life and let them bind us to the past, and forever label and judge us or others. Or we can look at them and say, “Wow, that was a terrible picture day. That’s really not me and it’s not who I want to be,” and let those pictures call us back to our original and ancient beauty – the image of God.

That’s what Jesus is doing with Peter today and it’s what he’s continually doing with us. Jesus is constantly calling us back to our truest selves, inviting us to see ourselves through his eyes, reminding us of who and whose, we truly are.

When we take time to properly study those pictures, we realise we've stepped outside of that divine/human relationship and violated our own integrity. We feel shame, disappointment, regret, guilt. But those pictures aren't about punishment or judgement. Sure, they reveal that we've been bruised by the darkness of sin but they're not our permanent condition. They point to something else, reminding us that there's more than can be shown in a single photograph.

Jesus doesn't condemn Peter. The rock that sank in the waters of doubt is also the foundation of the church. The denier of Jesus is also the feeder of Jesus' sheep. Jesus sees more than the snapshot of the moment. And if that's true for Peter it's also true for us.

We need to gather up those photographs we want to throw away and take a good, hard look at them through the eyes of Jesus, and look for what we've missed: the beauty hidden within disfigurement, the light that shines in the darkness, the healing that comes from great suffering, the belonging that overcomes rejection, the hope that stands amidst despair, the life that arises from death.

That's repentance. That's what makes Lent holy. Yes, you are broken, but you're beautifully broken. Yes, there is the darkness of sin in your life, but you are salt and light in the world. Yes, you suffer, but your pain is hidden in Christ's wounds. Yes, the world rejects what you believe, but you belong to God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Yes, you shake your heads in despair and death is your constant and inescapable companion, but the hope and life of the world says to you, "Get behind me where it's safe. You were created in my image, saved by my grace, and I love you." That's what I believe Jesus meant when he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me." It's not the snapshots of our life that define us. It's not Satan who defines us. Christ defines us, and it's the love of Christ that sees in us more than we see in ourselves and each other. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.