

Dave Zahl preached an excellent sermon last week about Peter – the Rock upon which the church is built. He pointed out that Peter failed over and over again. To look at Peter is not to look at an exemplary paradigm of spiritual success; to look at Peter is to look not at someone who resembles Jesus, but someone who needs Jesus.

The actual church is filled with people like Peter, people like you, and people like me – people who live cheek by jowl with spiritual and moral failure, people who need a Savior precisely because they cannot save themselves. Immediately after Peter’s shining moment – his confession of Christ as the Messiah – he plunges headlong into swamp of failure, misunderstanding, and wrongheadedness. In a big way too, so big that Jesus fires off a major rebuke: *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!”*

So what does Peter do that gets Jesus so up in arms? Well, he does the same thing that each one of us would do and does do all the time. He does what any right thinking, compassionate human being does – he tries to protect the person he loves from pain and suffering. There is a good reason that 2 million were evacuated ahead of Hurricane Irene.

Peter does what any doctor worth his salt does – help his patient avoid death. So when Jesus’ mood seems to turn a little sour, and He starts talking about the pain up ahead, Peter starts singing “I haven’t got time for the pain!” to him.

Jesus clearly has time for the pain and after He is identified as the Messiah, he realizes that it is now time for the pain. The scripture says, *“Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes”* – and more than that – *“be killed.”* To which, Peter, like anyone else who is not into sadism or cruelty, rebukes Jesus, exclaiming, *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* Wrong answer – not only wrong, but also evil and demonic even, according to Jesus’ devilish appellation of Peter.

“God forbid it! This must never happen to you.” That’s the wrong answer. Let me ask you a question. Would anyone in his right mind not give also give the wrong answer? Would anyone in his right mind not go six ways from Sunday to avoid pain and suffering in the people they love?

I can’t stand even trivial suffering, especially when it relates to my children. Nervousness or homesickness when they go off to school or camp – this must never happen to you. Any kind of illness that would hinder them in daily life – this must never happen to you. And, of course, any serious threat to their lives, from within or without – THIS MUST NOT EVER HAPPEN TO YOU!

I myself am personally and dedicatedly opposed to pain. I’ve never been a fan of the no pain no gain t-shirts. I have little stashes of Advil in strategic hiding places at home, in the car and in the office that I can access without anyone looking, namely my wife, who

thinks too much ibuprofen will give me some kind of horrible stomach condition. My well-butressed defense against pain is why I now walk rather than run for exercise.

Are you any different? You may have a Navy SEAL-like ability endure pain and suffering in your own body, but I doubt you relish the pain and suffering of those you love. Is there anything worse than sitting idly and helplessly by, watching someone we love suffer? We are all Peters, aren't we? We are all on the stumbling block side of Jesus Christ – opposed to His ways, dedicated to setting our mind on human rather than divine things.

Jesus, on the other hand, has no doubt that pain and suffering and death are the only way forward for him. He is as clear as a bell – a death knell bell – on this one. And not only for him – which is bad enough - but for all of us who would follow him. *“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 will find it.”*

What are we to make of this very difficult word – this theology of the cross - from Jesus? Well, we can and probably will deny it, as Peter denies it, as our culture denies our own mortality with every kind of elixir one can imagine. But a person can only deny the inevitability of death for so long. There are such things as earthquakes and hurricanes – or so I've heard. (Thanks, Lord, for the audio-visual support for this sermon!)

We can try for as long as we like to be like the 3 monkeys – one with his hands over his eyes, one with his hands over his ears, one with his hands over his mouth: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. Peter was the monkey who didn't want to see or hear the evil portents that Jesus was speaking. And yet, Peter's rebuke didn't slow down – not even for a second - the coming of Good Friday.

Maybe you know one of those don't talk, don't see, don't hear anything bad monkeys. Maybe you are one. You know that you can never get below the surface, because they are too afraid of pain and suffering and death to allow any whiff of it in the conversation. So you've just got to keep on the sunny side. The problem is that if you are always on the sunny side, you'll die anyway of skin cancer or heat stroke. As Jesus says, *“those who want to save their life will lose it.”*

So we can try to deny Jesus' word for as long as we can. But, by the grace of God, there is another possibility for us. We can receive it. Just receive it. Accept it. Say yes to it. We can take our hands off our eyes, ears, and mouth and stick them up into the air, in a gesture of surrender. Stick em' up, monkeys – hands in the air!

A friend in prison just wrote me about his conversations with the prison chaplain. He said the prison chaplain keeps asking him if he has surrendered to Jesus yet. My friend said he couldn't help chuckling to himself as he thought, “I didn't know that Jesus and I were at war!”

The good news is that you and Jesus are not at war. He has already claimed the victory over sin and death. The only war we wage is the war with ourselves, trying for all our might and all our life to keep our lives held together, staving off suffering and pain and of course death. Trying to save your own life is an exhausting venture, and according to Jesus, fruitless as well. This – suffering – must happen to you, and me, and to us all.

So, why not receive the word of the cross? Because to receive the word of the cross is also to receive the word of resurrection! Jesus says that he must die, but in 3 days he will be raised. He says those who lose their life for his sake will, in fact, find their lives. To receive this word of the cross – to accept and assimilate the suffering, pain and death that inevitably come to one and all – is to find that your life miraculously rises out of death. It is set your mind on divine things.

Where does this make landfall for you? You know which hurricanes you are trying to flee. Here's a thought, based on the Gospel According to Irene. Hunker down, wait it out, and trust that the sun will rise tomorrow – or at the latest – on the third day. For that is when the Son of God rose from the dead, claiming victory over death once and for all.

I'll end with a story of finding life out of death, of turning our minds from the human to the divine. It is the story of the soul singer Al Green. (JZ – Mockingbird)
Al Green was a total stud, in every sense of that word, at the very top of the soul music food chain in the early 70s, when something Earth-shattering happened to him. A woman with whom he was involved asked him to marry her, and he brushed her off. A few minutes later she returned to the room and dumped a pot of boiling grits on the singer. Then she went upstairs and shot herself in the head.

This horrible event proved to be a wake-up call for the artist. Al, who was known for his incredibly seductive lyrics and amazing voice, continued to perform, but soon noticed that he felt differently about the music he was performing. One night, while singing his classic "You Oughta Be With Me," he began to cry. The band continued to play while he sang the lyrics "you oughta be with me, you oughta be with me" over and over again through a torrent of tears.

As Al tells it, while he was singing the song, he realized that he had not written the lyrics for a woman, but had written them for God. He realized that all of his famously moving love songs were in fact songs of worship and of praise. Not long after that he spent an entire night in a bathroom on his knees lost in prayer and repentance and joy.

God oughta be with you. God is with you, raising you from death to life. Amen.