

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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Romans 12:9–21
Matthew 16:21–28

LIFE IS FAITH AND FAITH IS LIFE

We have two really good formulas or modern clichés from the reading today, don't we? We talk about being faced with temptation, and one of the clichés we offer is "Get behind me Satan," but usually it is when somebody is offering us a bite from their hot fudge sundae, attempting to undo all our dieting. But it has to mean more than that, doesn't it?

Remember when Jesus first spoke these words? It was back in the fourth chapter. The tempter, the Devil, was seeking to weaken an already exhausted Jesus. Jesus had just been baptized and gone into the wilderness, and in the final most alluring tease from Satan, those words came out. Satan had offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory—essentially offering Jesus a do-over for Adam and all his descendants. A New Testament scholar named F.F. Bruce describes this as danger at its greatest because the end is good—danger at its greatest because the end would in fact be good, wouldn't it? It would be a good thing if Jesus could just win us back—all of Adam's descendants. The tempter could hand over, in essence, a remaking of the Garden of Eden. Just think of it—evil authority vanquished, every kingdom would worship Christ, and all without having to endure the cross.

The danger is greatest when the end is good. But, then, that wouldn't have been the greater good, would it? In fact, it would have been a good based on a horrible lie—a hollow false teaching that we have come to emulate every time we cast our vote for approval of whatever personal sin we have justified. I didn't hear any admonition to win at all costs in Romans. I didn't hear anything about talking about one another or ignoring one another. I didn't hear anything in the 12th chapter that said, "You know, just go out and do whatever you have to do to succeed." It would have been a good based on a lie.

The lie is that somehow this world belongs to the powerful, or to those who can exercise the most individual indulgences in one lifetime. Second Corinthians says that Satan is only functioning as a god of this age. Do you see that? Do you see evil winning? Do you see Satan seemingly ruling the day? This world of ours is in a mess, and the reason it is is that we have voted for approval of our preferences.

Let me get back to Matthew. Jesus has just been baptized and he goes to the desert and he says those famous words: "Get behind me Satan." Now Peter (remember what happened—I know you probably can't because you haven't had time to get the context) has just confessed that Christ is the Messiah. And Jesus says: "Simon, son of Jonah, you have not had this revealed to you by any human means; it has come to you by the

Father. I am going to build my church on you. Petra shall be my rock.” Boy that is a baptism of approval if I ever heard one.

Now Peter has been anointed—baptized, if you will—just because he saw that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ of the living God. And now, Jesus says to him what he said to the ultimate adversary we all face. Peter becomes enemy number one of the Kingdom at this point. And then right after this, Jesus chooses Peter to go up and witness the transfiguration. To see him there with Elijah and Moses and to hear God himself speak from the heavens: “This is my beloved, my son, my beloved. Listen to him. This is the one with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” Those are the bookends, if you will, for what we read this morning. I will build my church on you for my Father has revealed this ... and then the Father speaks and says, “Listen to him.” And then I hear, “Get behind me, Satan. Get away from me, Satan. Get out of my way. Satan, get out of my sight.”

We do well to remember all that Peter did. Really and truly, when you look at what he said, all that Peter suggested, and he did this in private—I won’t even go there. He did this in private. A slight correction, my Lord. What Peter said to Jesus could easily have read, “May God be gracious and not let this occur,” or “God forbid that this should happen.” And then the loving, loyal words of the devoted disciple—words of personal loyalty and protection, “This will not happen to you.” As if to say, “I won’t let it.”

Life is faith, or it is nothing at all. And faith is the way we live life, or it is nothing. It is meaningless if we say we have faith and it doesn’t show in the way we interact with our world. And it is meaningless if it only means recycling. I’m sorry. That’s not enough. It’s a given, okay, it’s part of God’s plan. But putting things in a little blue container isn’t enough to fulfill what God is asking of us. Jesus says this life is just like his—it’s not ours. Jesus says that just as the Messiah must suffer, we also must be willing to endure, to willingly embrace; and if we want to use the language that would translate, Jesus said, in essence, we would have to be willing to take on the electric chair. That’s the equivalent of the cross—not the smooth shiny things, or the gold things that we wear. Wouldn’t it look weird if Christians wore little electric chairs around their necks? But that is how counter-culture the cross really is. It was the ultimate expression of condemnation and judgment of the Roman Empire. It was complete humiliation and stripping one of dignity.

But we have forgotten. Like Peter, we would rather have a Messiah that is a conquering Messiah. A conquering Messiah is one who is powerful and controls through fear or pain or even death. Isn’t that how we have seen our world lately—one maniacal dictator after another serving for decades? And we’ve seen the chaos that follows because it was all control and manipulation. A suffering Messiah proposes to us that we cannot have life—real life—until we learn the first lesson of discipleship. The first lesson is self-denial. And the second is continuous work at self-denial. It sounds like fun, doesn’t it?

“Get behind me, Satan.” “Take up your cross.” The pithy exhortations that we throw around encouraging others to be faithful or to behave would in reality sound much

different if we heard Christ speak them to our hearts. We would hear, “Stop picking at the bricks. Stop hindering my church. Be willing to risk your security in order to be faithful.” Yes, for too long we have said be faithful in small ways when the Gospel says be faithful in big ways as well as small ways. Be faithful whenever it can strengthen the worship of God.

I know I have mentioned this. Peter is the rock for building the church. Christ is the cornerstone, but Peter is that rock Christ can count on, and he is challenging this disciple to be in the world but not to function like the world functions. If Peter was to be the rock for Christ’s church and we are to be the church, why are we so surprised that it is all too easy for us to just suggest a slight correction—not a contradiction, just a slight correction, “Oh Lord, please don’t let this happen”—and we, too, become an adversary of the truth. Jesus places great value on us as his family and part of the family of God. Jesus knew the Psalms backwards and forwards. Remember when he was on the cross and he says, “Why have you forsaken me?” That is Psalm 22. He knew the Psalm by heart the way we know Psalm 23 by heart. He must have had the words from Psalm 49 echoing in the chambers of his heart and mind and consciousness when Peter was speaking. Psalm 49 says no man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him. A ransom for life is costly and no payment is ever enough. No payment we can make is ever enough. And then later in the Psalm, it says “but God will redeem my life, my soul, from the grave, God will surely take me unto himself.”

When we decide to follow Jesus, it becomes an ever present, continuous decision—an ongoing action—not simply something we did at a time and a place in the past, so now we can go on and choose to live however we choose. No, every time—every time. It’s not okay for Peter to make just this one little mistake. In every instance, Jesus says you have to choose faith over fear, Peter, even when it comes from those closest to you, even when it comes from your church. Fear is the opposite of life, not death. Think of it. How inconsequential. We fear rejection of one another. Jesus said: “I don’t want you to even be afraid of the cross that I am about to endure.”

I pray God will send God’s perfect love into every heart that is wracked by fear. And then, indeed, we will have a New Beginning. Amen.