



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Trying to Save Jesus

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, March 1, 2015

The Second Sunday in Lent —Based on Mark 8:31-38

I don't know about you, but I've been known to fantasize about time travel. So much of life only gives you a taste of the past. A picture here, a text there, an ancient object under glass. Old archeological sites are great. They are immersive. But they tend to be drab and tired. The most colorful things tend to be the plaques. Wouldn't it be nice if you didn't have to use your imagination? I've seen the movies about it. Read the books. The fantastical tales of people who travel back in time to see it in living color, to smell the air of the past. To play their part in ancient battles or to have a chat with a luminary. To pet a woolly mammoth, or have tea with your great-grandfather. And, here's where it gets interesting, what if you had the power to change the past? "To set right what once went wrong," as *Quantum Leap* put it? Something as simple as going back a few years and warning yourself not to go to such and such a place on such and such a night. Or something as grand as convincing an art school director in Vienna to admit young Adolph into their program, leading him into a more benign craft. Or perhaps something that goes to the heart of the Western world? And I don't think anyone has made this movie or written this novel. What if you could go back in time and save Jesus' life. What if you could go back in time and stop our dear friend from being so horribly killed so young? That seems like one of the most noble things you could do in all of time and space. And Jesus would be remembered as living to a ripe old age, regaling us with three times as many parables as we have now and leaving a legacy of decades of healing. Perhaps he would have the time in his retirement to work on his memoir. And in our time, back in the present, perhaps we Christians would no longer be seen wearing those little crosses, with their gruesome implications. Perhaps we'd wear a dove around our neck, instead?

But, especially in light of our reading for the day, I have the sense that even if we could make our way back to stroll with Jesus, to speak to him, to try to warn him, I don't think it would work. Because it was at a certain point of his ministry that he, as the Gospels say, began to "set his face to go toward Jerusalem." And his face was turned with the full awareness of what was likely to happen to him there. And it is today that we remember the time that Jesus actually starts to talk with his friends and disciples about what will happen. "Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes (of Jerusalem), and be killed, and after three days rise again." You have to understand that this is a cataclysmic shift in what the disciples expect. They have all these hopes of the world being restored by a person who is the mighty extension of God's right hand, not that God's champion will be defeated. They were beckoned by the promise that they would be "fishers of people," not that the fish would pull their rabbi by the net into the water and pick him apart like piranha. Yes, he says that on the third day he would be raised. But what does that even mean? When Jesus starts talking this way, publicly, their hopes and dreams for their lives threaten to be hollowed out from the inside. And it's not just their hopes and dreams, but it is their deep friendship that is threatened. They love Jesus. The last thing they want is for something horrible to happen to him! And so, my sense is that they enlist Peter, the most respected of the group, to quietly talk some sense into him. This is where I get the feeling that our time travel efforts wouldn't work. If Peter, one of his closest companions, can't do it, who could? And Peter couldn't! Peter takes Jesus aside and tells Jesus that this can't happen. There has to be another way. And Jesus rebukes him right back, in some of the strongest language we hear from him. "Get behind me, Satan!" We could say here that Jesus is being a jerk. But I think, if we have to say that, we should at the very least recognize that Peter is blind to the value of what Jesus is considering. He can't see what good can come of Jesus going to Jerusalem and getting himself killed. He can't understand what he means by being raised on the third day afterwards. All he can see is his friend and teacher being brutally murdered, and everyone else convinced that Jesus deserved it. Peter's personal hopes and personal devotion were getting in the way of the larger vision and the larger devotion that Jesus was on to. As

Jesus put it, Peter was setting his mind on human things, not divine things. This is better than being called Satan, but still must have stung. But I think the main thrust of Jesus' conviction is that some things are more important than other things. And Jesus had spent forty days in the wilderness parsing out what were the most important things in his life under God. And I think it was there that he discovered that some things are worth living out, even if they might get you exiled or even killed. As Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the good news of God will save it." This is the bitter pill of his triumph over temptation in the wilderness. This is the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane. And today we witness the rupture in the relationship between him and Peter that this insight causes.

There are so many red lines that others have drawn, arbitrary lines, lines of culture, lines of purity, lines of power, where people say, if you cross this line you are done. If you cross this line, you are fired. You are out of the family. You're dead. Yes, sometimes it is a line of blood. I think that a lot of our life is about navigating in ways that keep us from crossing those red lines. Making sure our loved ones don't cross those red lines, as Peter tried to do for his friend. He kept it up, you know. On the mount of Transfiguration, up there, he said, let's stay here. Let's build our own temple, don't mess with the temple in Jerusalem, and stay right here. But Jesus had a larger vision than that. He thought that he could do more good, he could be more true, he could be more loving by crossing those threatening red lines that the armies and the clergy had established. If the living lie is going to evaporate, someone has to be the first to cross the line. At great cost. But once it is done, we find a larger life that is opened up for us beyond that line. This is the kind of thing that Jesus did. This is what we mean that Jesus "died for us." Like Marie Curie, dying so that we might have atomic power. Jesus died on the cross so that we may have the power to envision and then establish a world where there are no more crosses, no more outcasts, for in them God abides, as holy as a temple.

And I wish that I could sugarcoat all this, what happens when blind, cruel conviction meets the pure of heart. But here it is. Lent is not a time for sugarcoated anything. This is our bittersweet spiritual legacy. As children, we bathe ourselves in this stark truth. And throughout our lives we consume this stark truth, hopefully becoming ever more aware. Hopefully having our horizon of awareness expanded. When Jesus says, "Take up your cross, and follow me," he is asking all of his disciples to look at the truth of people and ourselves as God has made us. To look at the truth in love. And to live that truth out, despite the threats that are out there, to our livelihoods and our lives. Peter represents evasion. Going in circles. Jesus shows us indomitable progress toward the truth. And for each of us, it is going to be different. For each of us, we have values to measure, choices to make, convictions to parse out. Some relationships are more important than others. Some callings are higher than others. Some relationships are higher than some callings. And vice versa. Who knows? These are truly invisible things. Ah, God knows. And in prayer, you may come to know. And, by heaven, you may come to know the cost. Often arbitrary. Often the result of other people's blind zeal. And yet, we have to ask ourselves a serious question. Is it worth it to save our skin, if we lose our purpose? If we lose our soul? It is rarely so cut and dried. In fact, it is often a multi-dimensional puzzle, with many angles and layers. Every life is. But it is Jesus who is calling us to follow him into the divine upshot of his life, so that we may find the divine upshot of our own.

We may yearn to travel back in time. Dwell there. Stay there. Maybe figure out how to change it. But that is a barren path. God is calling us to a different kind of time travel. In the other, fruitful, direction. A steady time travel into the future, a future of truth and love grounded in God's hope for us and for this world.

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