

Sermon February 25 Mark 8:31-38

*“Life’s up and Downs”*

The setting of today’s text finds the disciples and Jesus turning south, heading from Caesarea Philippi toward Jerusalem. Here, we find this section of Mark’s Gospel tracing Jesus’ preparation of his disciples for his coming death and resurrection. In this section, Mark records Jesus’ first precise prediction of His philosophy of life and death. Then, we see his disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ lessons on the cost of discipleship. This would be the first of several times Jesus would tell them about the Cross, which at this point is now just a little over six months beforehand. Jesus knew it was an excellent time to begin teaching them and disclose the greatest secret of his death and his true mission as the Messiah and Redeemer of the world. The disciples would soon learn that *“Life has its ups and Downs,”* when who, of all people, Peter, gets called “Satan” by the Son of God.

Speaking about the Son of God, who must suffer many things and be rejected by the chief priests and scribes and be killed and raised on the third day, make anyone’s life better by having his life end? Prior to the Cross, Jesus undergoes the many things he must do. He will undergo rejection through unfair trials, spit on, scoured, mocked, and killed, and lastly, raised from the dead. What the disciples considered was the ultimate bad news on that day near Caesarea Philippi was, in reality, the best news the world would ever receive. The very heart of the gospel, by dying and rising again, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, paid it all. He paid the penalty. He paid it all for sin and conquered death so that all who believed in Him might have eternal life. Let us pray.

**Heavenly Father, we hear your precious son Jesus calling. Sometimes, our lives feel like a back-and-forth battle with control. Help us surrender, release control, and follow the ways of your Son. You offer such a fantastic gift to surrender our lives to You.**

The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood what the perfect Christian life should be like. Bonhoeffer writes, “The way may be difficult, but the path and the end are glorious.” Brothers and sisters, it is part of “life’s ups and downs.” The cost of discipleship comes with a price. The Cross is laid on every one of us who professes faith as a Christian. The first Christ-suffering that all people must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world.” We all have worldly attachments, and please do not say you do not. But once we encounter Christ and embark on the path of discipleship, we can surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death, meaning we give our lives to death. “When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die.” Thus, the cost and call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, means both death and life. In fact, every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts. But we do not want to die, and therefore, Jesus Christ and his call are necessarily our death as well as our life. Perhaps we can call it the game of life, but folks, it is not a game, for Jesus says, “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”

I have run across those during my life who think life is a game. Yes, it is part of human nature to approach life as one big game made up of a lot of little games where competition can be fun, exciting, and stimulating. But life is a whole lot more than a game for those who are

followers of Jesus Christ. When a believer needs to own the biggest house, drive the most expensive SUV, seek promotions over the more qualified, and win every argument, something is terribly wrong from God's point of view. It is not right to run over people's feelings, bend or break the rules, and gloat over worldly victories.

One of the most famous things Jesus ever said concerned the soul, our souls, about that mysterious but undeniable spiritual center to who we are as marvelously complex creatures made in the image of God. In verse 35, Jesus talks about saving human life but then switches to "soul" in verses 36 and 37. If we believe that Jesus is the "Son of God," we should take seriously what Jesus says about our souls. First of all, if we believe Jesus is the One who created those souls, who would know better than Jesus how they work?

What we all want is to hang on to the life we have come to enjoy. However, life has its ups and downs. Eventual suffering, pain, despair, and, ultimately, final death becomes what we all rather dearly wish to avoid. Unless depression or grave illness has overcome life's goodness, I am pretty sure most of us would have to admit that most days, most of the time, we enjoy being alive.

I would think we all enjoy a good laugh and appreciate good food. Yes, for some of us, even McDonald's fish sandwiches are good food, and we enjoy the beauty of creation's beauty. We feel satisfied when we accomplish something well, and we would give almost anything to keep on watching our children or grandchildren grow. In general, we become intrigued by the idea of life having a new horizon with new possibilities and new things to explore. But the notion that there might not be another "next" for us is what can instead quickly bring a chilling fear to head off whatever it is that threatens our being, threatens our lives to hippity-hop along pretty much the way we always have.

Let's face it. We don't want life to end as we know it, which is why when Jesus predicts his end to life on earth, Peter tries to shout Jesus down. "Don't talk that way, Master Jesus! If you are the Messiah, then you have got to save your life so that you can save and then improve the lot of our lives, too! We all should recognize by now that Jesus has to go another way. He has to die, and if we are wise, we should get behind him, which leads me to Peter. Remember, Jesus calls Peter "Satan" and tells him to go, which means "behind me," or in the natural Greek sense to "follow." Jesus says to Peter, you are not mindful of the things of God, but of men. In the next verse, Jesus says that if anyone wants to follow, they need to deny themselves and take up the cross. Here we are back to the cross again.

What Mark is possibly saying is that there are two ways to get behind Jesus. First, if you insist on holding onto this life, seeking the solution to life's difficulties by grabbing still more of that same life, don't be ignorant of the evil antagonist who offers opposition to setting your mind on God's interests. We see Peter acting as Satan's catspaw, setting a trap for Jesus to undo his mission to earth. We see Peter's human desire to spare His Master to avoid the very suffering to which Jesus had committed himself. Secondly, if we are willing to let go, to release that grip on the human ego and the life we hope will boost that ego, if we can just die alongside Jesus, then we can "get behind" Jesus as a disciple.

Let's retake a closer look at Jesus' disciples. Although they became aware that Jesus was the Messiah, I do not believe they understood what the title Messiah meant and what the Messianic vocation of Jesus would entail. Jesus begins to explain to them what it meant for him to be Messiah as Mark gives it to us. It is the way Jesus "must" do these things in the necessity of the Father's plan of salvation for his people. In Jewish history, the Jews understood the concept of Messiah was central to the Old Testament prophecies in multiple ways and ideas. The Messiah would be a King, a shepherd, a liberator, a redeemer. However, the one element the rabbis entirely left out was the element of suffering and shame. What they did not have was the cross. Oh, the wonderful cross.

We have the benefit of looking at the Messiah from the other side of the cross and resurrection. The New Testament authors point to one key prophecy from Isaiah 53, which shows that Ebed Yahweh, the Servant of the Lord, would bear the sins of the people. He would be despised, rejected by men, smitten by God, afflicted, and killed. The New Testament readers would look back at the life of Jesus, backward to the Psalms of Israel, back to Psalm 22, and it looked like an eyewitness account of the cross. A precise prediction of the coming Messiah. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" The Rabbis of Jesus' time completely missed it. They missed who the royal messiah would be. When Jesus taught his disciples what it meant to be the Messiah, it was a total shock. Do you mean the Messiah has to suffer and be rejected and has to die? You could see the lightbulb go off in the disciples' heads, the followers of the Messiah. They heard these words of Jesus not only as a death sentence upon Jesus but as a death sentence upon themselves. And how did they respond as a student to the teacher? Not just any teacher but the one who exemplifies all truth! The Messiah

Brothers and sisters, let us not miss the truth. Let us not miss the Messiah. Let us not miss the fact we must be mindful of God and not the things of this earth. The godly person is deeply concerned about the things of God, but the godless person has no concern for the things of God, only a preoccupation with this world. Each of us has to look into the mirror and ask ourselves: where is my heart? Are we preoccupied with the things of this world, or are we seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and letting everything else come as it will? Is there another goal in this world in which we devote all of our energy?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom I mentioned earlier, warned of the church being captured by a spirit of cheap grace and discipleship without a cost, a Christian life without danger. We see Jesus addressing his disciples and those who would gather around what genuine discipleship involves. Not what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, but instead what it means for you and me to follow the Messiah. Jesus said, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Me."

If we are willing to say, "I am a Christian," then we have to be willing to pick up that cross beam and follow. The Christian life is a throwaway life, and every minute of every day that we live without rejection, affliction, suffering, and death is a life of grace. You can safely bet we will be thrown into the junk of this world, but as Jesus said, "Count that cost if you want to follow me; it will cost you your life." Here, we see Jesus speaking in economic terms, something

people surely would understand, but in Life's ups and downs, how much is your soul worth? How much did Jesus pay for it? How much did Jesus pay to secure the safety and redemption of your soul forever? He paid for it all! We do not need to have this or that to make our lives meaningful, for our souls have already been bought and purchased by Jesus. We have the whole world in our hands only if we stand with what it costs in Christ's suffering, his rejection, his death, and his cross. Amen.