

EXODUS 3:1-15 & MATTHEW 16:21-28

A GROUP OF PEOPLE WERE HAVING A WONDERFUL DAY RIVER RAFTING, WHEN THEY HIT A WHIRLPOOL.

THE RAFT WAS CAUGHT IN THE WATERS AND THE FORCE THREW EVERYONE INTO THE RIVER.

FORTUNATELY, ALL OF THEM FOUND REFUGE ON ROCKS OR MADE IT TO SHORE.

HOWEVER ONE WOMAN, WHO HAD GRABBED HOLD OF THE RAFT STUCK, ON THE OUTER EDGE OF THE WHIRLPOOL, REFUSED TO LET GO.

HER COMPANIONS SAW THAT SHE WAS IN DANGER OF BEING SUCKED UNDER THE RAFT AND SHOUTED TO HER TO LET GO.

SHE WAS AFRAID TO DO SO AT FIRST, BUT EVENTUALLY LET GO OF THE RAFT AND MADE IT TO SAFETY.

SOMETIMES LETTING GO, EVEN WHEN WE BELIEVE IT IS THE RIGHT OR SENSIBLE THING TO DO, CAN BE VERY HARD.

THERE WAS A QUOTE ON FACEBOOK THIS WEEK, WHICH SAID: "ONE OF THE HARDEST LESSONS IN LIFE IS LETTING GO; WHETHER IT IS GUILT, ANGER, LOVE, LOSS, OR BETRAYAL."

INDEED EVEN IN THE MIDST OF TURBULENCE, WHAT IS CAN FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE TO US THAN WHAT MIGHT BE.

AND SOMETIMES WE ARE JUST COMFORTABLE. FOR EXAMPLE: MOSES CERTAINLY FOUND HIMSELF IN A PRETTY COMFORTABLE PLACE.

YEARS EARLIER HE HAD LEFT PHARAOH'S HOUSEHOLD AND EGYPT IN FEAR, AFTER HE KILLED AN EGYPTIAN WHO WAS BEATING A HEBREW SLAVE.

MOSES FOUND REFUGE, A WIFE, AND AN OCCUPATION IN MIDIAN, WHERE HE TENDED HIS FATHER-IN-LAW'S FLOCK.

WE MAY IMAGINE THAT FOR MOSES, LIFE WAS GOOD, COMFORTABLE, AND SAFE.

ALL WAS WELL IN HIS WORLD, UNTIL ONE DAY HE SAW AN AMAZING SITE IN THE WILDERNESS.

HE NOTICED A BUSH WAS ON FIRE, AND YET IT WAS NOT BURNING UP.

THEN, ALMOST AS SOON AS HE WAS DRAWN TO THIS PHENOMENON, HE HEARD A VOICE CALL TO HIM FROM THE BUSH.

HE WAS TOLD IT WAS THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB, WHO WAS CALLING TO HIM, TO REMOVE HIS SANDALS.

THEN MOSES, WHO HAD HAD SYMPATHY FOR THE SLAVES IN EGYPT WAS GIVEN THE WONDERFUL NEWS THAT GOD HAD COME DOWN TO EARTH IN THE FLAMES OF THE BUSH TO FREE HIS PEOPLE.

BUT, WHEN MOSES HEARD THE DETAILS OF GOD'S MISSION-SPECIFICALLY THAT THE LORD WAS GOING TO USE MOSES AS HIS INSTRUMENT OF DELIVERANCE, MOSES WAS HESITANT.

AFTER ALL THE LAST PLACE HE WANTED TO GO WAS BACK TO EGYPT.

SO MOSES TRIED TO PERSUADE GOD IN VARIOUS WAYS, IN THE REST OF CHAPTER THREE, AND SOME OF CHAPTER FOUR OF EXODUS, HE WAS NOT THE RIGHT CHOICE.

GOD RESPONDED TO EACH CONCERN, BUT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT REPLY THE LORD GOD MADE TO MOSES WAS THE ONE IN TODAY'S READING- "I WILL BE WITH YOU."

THE LORD, EVEN PROMISED MOSES HIS MISSION WOULD BE SUCCESSFUL, WHEN GOD SAID THAT MOSES AND GOD'S PEOPLE WOULD WORSHIP GOD AT HIS HOLY MOUNTAIN.

IT IS NOT OFTEN PEOPLE, CALLED BY GOD TO A TASK, HAVE BEEN SO CLEARLY PROMISED ALMOST IMMEDIATE SUCCESS. AND YET, MOSES RESISTED THE MISSION.

TO BE FAIR TO HIM, WE SHOULD REMEMBER MOSES DID NOT REALLY KNOW GOD VERY WELL, AND HE CERTAINLY WAS NOT A MAN WHO HAD EXHIBITED THAT HE LIVED BY FAITH.

STILL, PEOPLE ARE RARELY GIVEN SUCH A VIVID DEMONSTRATION OF GOD'S EXISTENCE AND PRESENCE AS MOSES WAS GIVEN.

WE KNOW FROM THE REST OF THE STORY, MOSES EVENTUALLY OBEYED GOD, AND FREED HIS PEOPLE.

AND, IT WAS DIRECTLY TO MOSES, AND THROUGH HIM TO GOD'S PEOPLE, THE LORD GAVE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND OTHER PARTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE.

IN GOD'S CALL TO MOSES WE ARE REMINDED THE LORD DOES NOT CALL FLAWLESS PEOPLE, NOR IN MOSES' CASE ONE WHO WAS ENTHUSIASTIC TO SERVE HIM.

THIS BRINGS US TO LOOK AGAIN AT THE DISCIPLE PETER, WHO, LIKE MOSES, WAS ALSO FLAWED; BUT UNLIKE HIM HAD A GREAT DEAL OF ENTHUSIASM.

UNFORTUNATELY, AS THE GOSPEL STORY SHOWS, PETER'S ENTHUSIASM WAS SOMETIMES DIRECTED IN THE WRONG PLACE.

TODAY, WE CONTINUE ON IN THE STORY WE BEGAN LAST SUNDAY, WHERE PETER HAD PROCLAIMED JESUS WAS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD.

JESUS BLESSED PETER BECAUSE HE WAS GIVEN THIS INSIGHT BY GOD THE FATHER.

THEN PETER WAS CALLED TO A TASK OF LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH, WHICH WOULD BE BUILT UPON THE CONFESSION OF JESUS AS LORD.

ALL SEEMED WELL IN PETER'S WORLD, THINGS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN GOING BETTER, SINCE JESUS ADMITTED HE WAS THE MESSIAH.

FOR THE DISCIPLES, THAT TITLE MEANT GOD WOULD USE JESUS TO RESTORE ISRAEL TO HER FORMER GLORY, AND JESUS WOULD SIT ON DAVID'S THRONE.

PETER AND THE OTHERS ALSO BELIEVED THEY WOULD HAVE KEY ROLES IN THE KINGDOM.

BUT THEN, JESUS BEGAN TO FILL THE DISCIPLES IN ON THE DETAILS OF HIS MISSION AND WHAT WOULD SOON TRANSPIRE.

AND WHAT HE TOLD THEM WAS DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED TO THEIR EXPECTATIONS, AS WELL AS BEING TRAGIC NEWS.

PETER SPOKE FOR ALL OF THEM WHEN HE DECLARED THE SUFFERING AND DEATH JESUS SPOKE ABOUT MUST NEVER HAPPEN.

IN THE GREEK TEXT PETER DECLARATION OF -GOD FORBID, THIS MUST NEVER HAPPEN, LITERALLY MEANS GOD BE GRACIOUS TO YOU.

THIS GIVES US A CLEARER PICTURE OF PETER'S FEAR AND GRIEF AT THE THOUGHT JESUS WOULD DIE IN SUCH A WAY.

SURELY, PETER MEANT WELL BY HIS REBUKE OF JESUS. AND YET HIS WORDS SAID IN IGNORANCE, WERE MORE HURTFUL THAN PETER COULD EVER HAVE IMAGINED.

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT PETER'S RESISTANCE TO JESUS STATED MISSION, HAD THE DANGER OF DRAWING JESUS AWAY FROM THE VERY PURPOSE OF HIS BIRTH.

PETER, UNKNOWINGLY, WAS TEMPTING JESUS TO FORSAKE HIS FATHER'S WILL AND PLANS, FOR A DIFFERENT PATH.

AFTER ALL, JESUS COULD HAVE HAD A USEFUL LIFE-TEACHING, HEALING, RAISING PEOPLE FROM THE DEAD, AND MIRACULOUSLY FEEDING THEM.

THE DISCIPLES, OF COURSE HOPED FOR MORE THAN THAT, THEY WANTED TO SEE JESUS ENTHRONED IN JERUSALEM.

SUCH WAS THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S PROMISE TO DAVID FOUND IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURE.

AND LET'S FACE IT, IF JESUS HAD SUCCESSFULLY OVERTHROWN ROME, IT IS MOST LIKELY THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS WOULD HAVE GOTTEN ON BOARD WITH HIS RULE.

SURELY THIS WAS THE WAY TO GO, THIS WAS THE RIGHT MISSION FOR JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES, NOT THE ONE THAT LEAD TO HIS DEATH.

WE KNOW, OF COURSE, JESUS WAS ENTHRONED, BUT ON THE CROSS, OUTSIDE THE CITY WALLS.

WE ALSO KNOW, BECAUSE OF HIS RESURRECTION, THAT THE MISSION JESUS SAID HE WAS ON WAS INDEED GOD'S MISSION.

BUT NO ONE LIVING COULD ENVISION, LET ALONE UNDERSTAND OR ACCEPT, THE CORRECTNESS OF JESUS' PREDICTION ABOUT HIMSELF AND HIS MISSION.

CONSEQUENTLY, THE DISCIPLES RESISTED IT. EVEN WHEN THEY CEASED TO QUESTION JESUS ABOUT IT, THEY DID NOT REALLY BELIEVE IT WOULD HAPPEN.

INSTEAD, LIKE MOSES, AND LIKE THE WOMAN IN THE OPENING ILLUSTRATION, THEY CLUNG TO WHAT WAS FAMILIAR, FELT SAFE, OR FULFILLED THEIR DREAMS.

LOOKING BACK THROUGH THE EMPTY TOMB TO THE STORY, IT IS EASY FOR US TO CRITICIZE THE LACK OF TRUST IN JESUS THAT WAS SHOWN.

HOWEVER, LOOKING FORWARD FROM THE TOMB INTO OUR OWN LIVES AND CHOICES, OUR OWN FAITH AND RESISTANCE, WE CAN SEE WE ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM THE TWELVE.

THIS BRINGS US TO CONSIDER THE SAVIOR'S MESSAGE ABOUT SELF DENIAL.

SO OFTEN CHRISTIANS THINK JESUS WAS MAKING A "ONE SIZE FITS ALL" STATEMENT, BUT HE WAS NOT.

SELF DENIAL HAS BEEN MISINTERPRETED THROUGH THE CENTURIES IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS.

SOME CHRISTIANS HAVE THOUGHT IT MEANS TO DENY YOURSELF ANY KIND OF PLEASURE IN LIFE, OR WORLDLY COMFORTS.

OTHERS, THINK SELF DENIAL AND TAKING UP YOUR CROSS MEANS A LIFE OF BURDENS, OR- STAYING IN DANGEROUS OR HURTFUL SITUATIONS OR RELATIONSHIPS.

SOMETIMES IT IS TRUE THAT GOD CALLS US TO MAKE CERTAIN SACRIFICES- IN AREAS OF SAFETY, COMFORT, OR MATERIAL GAIN.

HOWEVER, IN DOING SO, GOD'S INTENTION IS FOR US TO MIRROR JESUS' SACRIFICE ON THE CROSS.

BUT THE ONLY PURPOSE FOR THIS IS FOR US TO SERVE TO FORWARD OR ENHANCE CHRIST'S MISSION.

CONVERSELY, WHEN GOD BESTOWS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS WITH CERTAIN TALENTS, MATERIAL AND OTHER RESOURCES, POWER, OR RESPONSIBILITY, THE CALL IS ALSO TO FURTHER CHRIST'S MISSION.

THIS TOO IS A FORM OF SELF DENIAL, IN THAT WE DENY ANY TENDENCY TO USE WHAT WE HAVE FOR OUR OWN BENEFIT ALONE, AND INSTEAD SEEK TO SERVE JESUS, BY SERVING OTHERS.

AND SO WE ARE REMINDED, WHILE ALL CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO SELF DENIAL AND TO TAKE UP OUR CROSS, HOW WE DO SO, IS DIFFERENT FOR ALL OF US.

IT IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER SELF DENIAL AND CROSS BEARING ARE GOD'S WILL ONLY WHEN THEY SERVE HIS PURPOSE, NOT OUR OWN, OR ANYONE ELSE'S.

AND SO, A MORE HELPFUL WAY TO UNDERSTAND JESUS' WORDS FOR OUR LIVES IS- TO LET GO OF THAT WHICH INTERFERES WITH OR INHIBITS OUR SERVICE TO CHRIST.

IN THE AREA OF SELF, LETS LOOK AT SOME EXAMPLES OF THE KIND OF THINGS THAT MAY CAUSE US TO RESIST GOD'S MISSION.

THERE IS SELF: CENTEREDNESS, AGGRANDIZEMENT, IMPORTANCE, EXTREME SELF RELIANCE, OR SUFFICIENCY.

CONVERSELY TRAITS LIKE: A GOOD SELF ESTEEM, REASONABLE SELF CARE, AND HEALTHY SELF CONFIDENCE CAN HELP US ON OUR MISSION FOR THE LORD.

THE FORMER LIST CONTAINS THE KIND OF TRAITS THAT SHOULD BE PART OF SELF DENIAL, SINCE THEY MAY LEAD TO LOSS OF THE TRUE PURPOSE OF OUR LIFE.

THE LATTER ARE THOSE WHICH CAN BE USEFUL WHEN COUPLED WITH RELIANCE ON GOD, SINCE THEY CAN ENHANCE THE LIFE IN CHRIST WE GAIN THROUGH OUR SALVATION.

LET US PRAY:

O LORD, OUR GOD, WE HAVE HEARD HOW WHEN MOSES RECEIVED YOUR CALL HE WASN'T SURE HE WANTED TO OBEY.

AND IN THE GOSPEL STORY WE SEE HOW PETER'S FEAR, OF WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO JESUS, WAS SO GREAT THAT HE TRIED TO PREVENT JESUS FROM FULFILLING HIS MISSION.

FORGIVE US THE TIMES THAT WE HAVE RESISTED THE MISSION OF JESUS AND THE TASKS TO WHICH YOU HAVE CALLED US.

BE WITH US, GUIDE AND STRENGTH US, WE PRAY. HELP US TO HEAR YOU AND OBEY WHEN YOU CALL US TO LET GO OF THE FAMILIAR AND STEP OUT IN FAITH AND LOVE TO DO YOU WILL.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS WHO DENIED HIMSELF AND TOOK UP HIS CROSS FOR OUR SAKES, WE PRAY. AMEN

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