

Second Sunday in Lent – 2024

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Romans 5:1-11

Mark 8:27-38

As a man, I'm not particularly complex. Most men aren't complex. I'm not sure how ladies feel about that but it's true. As an example, we totally dig "avenging angel" movies. An avenging angel movie is a film where the humble hero observes innocent people suffering at the hands of evil-doers and then takes action; decisive action; brutal and comprehensive action. Batman is an avenging angel. Denzel Washington in the *Equalizer* movies is an avenging angel. Liam Neeson in the *Taken* movies is an avenging angel. Those franchises make bank because men see themselves in the title role. Denzel is the avatar for the men in the audience. He dispenses justice. He is cool doing it. Nobody evil gets away. I wish that there were 12 *Equalizer* movies. Bonus is that he doesn't swear.

Peter is not complex. His ideas are straightforward. Here's one: good shouldn't suffer. Let's rewrite the bible for a moment. There's Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas betrays the Lord. The Temple Guard is there to arrest this innocent man. Peter is not down with what is happening. He pulls out his sword and lops off the ear of Malcus, the high priest's servant (John 18:10). So now let's rewrite what happens next. It's a stop-action scene. Everything pauses except Peter and Jesus. The Lord walks over to Peter and asks for advice. "Hey, Peter, I'm conflicted. I'm not sure what I should do. I could let these brigands arrest me and let Pilate convict me and let the Romans crucify me or I could call down 12 legions of angels to fight for me. What should I do?" Is there any question what Peter would suggest? "Seventy-two thousand angels sounds like the right call, Master. Summon them down" (Matthew 26:53).

Man's reflexive religious ideas are untrustworthy. This is not an isolated problem. You, me and the world over – man's reflexive religion notions are unreliable. God was direct with Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). The Gospel which animates Christ's church is not about avenging angels. The Gospel is about a Suffering Servant, a crucified King, the Lord of heaven and earth dying to save His enemies. Does it surprise you when people mischaracterize the Word of God, when worship looks like vapid entertainment, when the church adopts an avenging angel mentality, a political bent, a prosperity gospel, a works-righteous legalism? It's shocking, disappointing, I'll grant you. But are you surprised? People get theology wrong. It's hard to say that without sounding haughty, but it's undeniable. People get Christianity wrong.

Jesus displayed His omniscience. He taught His disciples what was coming, what the Christ must suffer. This divine symphony hit Peter's ears and to Peter it was discordant, fingernails on a chalkboard. Peter went into rebellion. The things of man; Peter was infatuated with the things of man; that's what his ears wanted to hear (2 Timothy 4:3-4). That's me; that's you; that must change. Peter wasn't alone. The influential and learned men of Israel claimed that Jesus was in league with Beelzebub. "It's only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" (Matthew 12:24). Jesus' brothers promoted a "rock star" approach to His ministry. "No one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to

the world” (John 7:4). The things of man; the Pharisees, Jesus’ brothers, and then Peter. Peter was Satan’s avatar. Jesus saw it in vivid technicolor. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man” (Mark 8:33)

Not only is that account historically accurate, it is a living prompt. That rebuke in Scripture is designed to prompt you to probe your own conduct, your own mindset and what you see taking place around you in Christ’s church. The things of God or the things of man; you cannot serve two masters. The things of man are personal power, self-centered glory, honor that lords it over others, glamour that promotes vanity, wealth that serves greed – man is addicted to that earthly mammon. Mary, in her Magnificat, tells you what God’s things are: “He brings down the mighty from their thrones and He exalts those of low degree” (Luke 2:52). St. Paul tells you what the things of God are: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). St. John tells us what the things of God are: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

It’s the Word that forms us. It’s the Word that changes our minds – refining our minds that we turn away from the things of man and wholly embrace the things of God. This Word forms us. A lifetime in the Word of God clarifies what God’s ways are and how they are delightfully superior to man’s ways. When Christ speaks to us of His cross we who have been formed by God’s Word know that there is nothing higher, nothing more glorious, more true, more lasting, more applicable, more personal. We wouldn’t trade our birthright of this Divine Service for the gruel of man’s notions of what worship is to be. Pick up your cross, Jesus says. Tell me how easy that is for you. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). The disciples fled when Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:50). No cross for them. Peter denied the Lord three times (Matthew 26:69-75). No cross for Peter. In the Upper Room, the disciples were in an argument as to which of them was greatest (Luke 22:24). The things of man ran in their hearts and the things of man run in our hearts. How much evidence do you need to recognize this? Man’s reflexive religious notions are untrustworthy.

Change; I strongly believe that God changes us. I believe that that change is the most marvelous thing that has happened to any of us. The beauty of faith is God’s love changing people, enlarging our hearts, deepening our sight, enriching our days, and this is God’s grace in action. Truth becomes our ally, our boon companion, our comfort in difficulty. Truth is the things of God. A suffering Messiah was sacrificed in order to save you from death. That truth is all around you, it is a heavenly reality with endless dimensions and it lifts you above the squalor of this fallen world. The Lord of glory was horribly mangled and His torn corpse was laid in a tomb. He changed. Glorified, Christ was raised on Easter. His wounds testify to His victory. He was dead and now He lives. The resurrection changed Christ’s first disciples. They picked up their crosses gladly. The risen Christ ministers to you with His life, His death and His resurrection. That’s what changes you. Christ ministering to you changes you. You are a participant in Jesus’ death and resurrection; that’s what changes you (Romans 6). You know that His ways are higher than your ways. You repent of your sin, you receive Christ’s absolution, you grow in trust, and you are changed.

Changed you now knows that God will give you a cross to bear. Changed you understands that you can't have Christ's righteousness without picking up your own cross. Changed you knows that you don't bear the sins of others, like our Lord, but you bear Christ's righteousness and a cross will come with that. It is a delight to grow in the grace of our Lord and you have known that sweetness. It is a delight to conform your life to God's will and you know that sweetness as well. The things of God are this altar and Christ's body and blood. The things of God are loving your neighbor and sacrificing yourself for those in need. What God has done for us is straightforward and glorious. We will celebrate it with great joy until He returns.