

Pentecost XV (Proper 19 B) RCL
September 13, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

There's a true story that comes from the sinking of the *Titanic*. A frightened woman found her place in a lifeboat that was about to be lowered into the cold swells of the North Atlantic. She suddenly thought of something she needed, so she asked permission to return to her stateroom before they cast off. (This was obviously early in the evacuation.) She was granted three minutes, after which they would leave without her.

She ran across the deck that was beginning to slant, raced through the gambling room with all the money that had rolled to one side – ankle deep – and finally came to her stateroom. She pushed aside her diamond rings and other expensive jewelry, reached into a box on a shelf above her bed and grabbed three small oranges. She found her way back to the lifeboat and got in.

A few hours earlier, she would not have chosen a whole crate of oranges over the tiniest diamond. But death had boarded the *Titanic*, and that had changed everything. Priceless things had become worthless, and worthless things had become treasures. In that moment, she preferred three small oranges to a crate of diamonds.

What is it about human nature that requires a crisis to re-order our priorities? Why is it that we have to hit a brick wall before we stop and look at the path we've been taking? One minute... we are speeding along the road of life... and the next, we find ourselves in a heap... having crashed headlong into some immovable, unexpected, life changing something.

- The phone rings in the wee hours and it's not good news.
- The doctor looks up from the lab reports and says, "I'm sorry..."
- The economy tanks, the company downsizes, the investment evaporates.
- The crisis arrives. Life turns on a dime.

And suddenly those things that were important one minute are absolutely UNIMPORTANT the next. The things that had felt so burdensome before are simply not worth worrying about. Everything is turned upside down, inside out.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to realize what's really important.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus and the disciples have been on a journey. They have been teaching and healing the sick, and now they have come to a town called Caesarea Philippi, in what is now modern Lebanon.

Quite literally, this story is the middle of Mark's account of Jesus. But more significantly, it is from here – after visiting Caesarea Philippi – that Jesus will turn toward Jerusalem, toward the destiny that awaits him there.

He must have been wondering what was going to happen next. How his disciples were going to take it. Would they follow him all the way? Could they go the distance? Maybe he thought he could help them understand; prepare them.

So he asks them: What are people saying about me? Who... what... do they think I am? They answer: oh, some say Elijah or one of the other prophets. Some even say you're John the Baptist come back for justice. (Maybe they even laughed some about that one.)

But then he asked them: Well, what about you? What do you say? Who do *you* think I am?

Of course, they must have been wondering that same thing for months: Is he the One? Is he the real thing? But it is easier to believe that a messiah will come than to believe one has come. The idea of a messiah is easier to live with than the reality.

The expectation, the idea, the hope – those things don't demand anything of us. But a present messiah... well, that changes everything. Especially if that present messiah doesn't fit our expectations of the promised one.

Peter – naturally it was Peter, the impetuous one – blurted it right out: You are the messiah. You are the one; the one we've been waiting for.

Maybe if he hadn't said it, maybe if no one had said it out loud, things would have stayed the same. At least for a while longer. But there it was.

And afterwards, after Jesus and Peter had exchanged angry words – Peter, about not talking craziness about dying and Jesus, about getting with the program – afterwards, Jesus turned to the crowd and told them exactly what it would cost to belong to him in the end.

- Deny yourselves.
- Take up your own cross.
- Follow me.

- Be prepared to lose this life in order to gain the one that matters... because if you spend your life's energy trying to hold onto this one (which of course you can't ultimately do anyway), you will lose both this one and the next.

Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me. Those who lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the good news of God's love and forgiveness and salvation... will save it.

We all know those words. We've heard them all our lives. Yet... it is not what we do. At least, it is not what I do. Instead, we use our limited life's resources – our time and energy and abundance – trying to make sure we have enough. Enough food, enough money, enough stuff – in order to convince ourselves that we are safe and secure. When in truth, that's an illusion!

What are we safe from? Natural disaster? Economic ruin? Disease? Death?

A Polish-born American rabbi and writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, is the greatest Yiddish storyteller of our time. He wrote a short story called, "The Son from America." In it, the son has been gone from the tiny village in Poland for 40 years.

He has made his fortune in America and goes back for a visit. When he arrives, he asks his father what he has done with the money orders sent each year from America. The father shows him all of the money – stashed away in an old boot.

"Father, this is a fortune! Why didn't you spend it?" "On what?" asks the father. The son asks him question after question. What about this? What about that? But the answer is always the same: they lack for nothing. The garden, the cow, the goat, the chickens provide them with all they need.

So the son spends the next few days observing the "poverty" of the townspeople. He thinks of the suitcase of gifts he brought... his plans to bring wealth to everyone in this village. Then he realizes... they need nothing. They truly have everything.

What is it we need so desperately? What is truly important?

Who do we say that this Jesus is? If not the messiah sent by God to restore all creation to its rightful relationship with God – then, why are we here at all? Sleep in. Play golf. Read the paper.

But if we say with Peter – wild, crazy Peter – that he is the Anointed One, THEN EVERYTHING CHANGES. This is where we either ante up or go home.

Among those in the AA and recovery community, the old wisdom was that the alcoholic, the addict, had to hit bottom before he or she could admit they needed help and turn to AA and embrace the steps of recovery. But in more recent years, those in long term recovery have helped others who were caught in a sure and certain downward spiral by doing what they call “raising the bottom.”

Instead of standing by passively and waiting until the afflicted person ended up in the proverbial – or literal – gutter, those who have already been there help them see the inevitable. And sometime, *sometimes*, the crash is averted. Reality is faced. New life begins.

Perhaps... just perhaps... we don't have to wait until a crisis comes. Maybe, just maybe, we can “raise the bottom” and not have to hit that wall in order to re-examine what's really important.

Jesus turned to the crowd – not just the disciples – but to all of us who have been tagging along and listening in. This is one of those moments when what was important a minute ago doesn't seem important now; when we see ourselves in a new light, let go of what doesn't matter; when we take hold of the things that will open us to God and will give us life. True life.

It may not be an easy path. It may take us through our own Jerusalem. But in this moment of knowing who he is, how can we ever turn back to the life we had before? It was just a minute ago, but everything is different the moment we name who he is.

Everything.

Amen.

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