

Sermon

I would venture a guess that most of us know what it means to have a broken heart. We can pretty easily remember what that feels like. Whether it is a call from the doctor saying the cancer has returned, or the rejection at school by the person we thought was our friend, or the realization that the marriage is over, or the death of someone we love, we know what it means to have a broken heart.

Our gospel for this week is a somewhat familiar passage of Scripture. The challenge with familiar passages is that sometimes we read or hear them without noticing the details.

I would suggest that there's more to this encounter between Jesus and Peter than what we might first think. It's easy to just think that Peter is being Peter, being sort of goofy – saying the wrong thing and upsetting Jesus, but there is more there, something that is much more relatable than that. I think Peter faces the stress of an uncertain future and then his heart breaks in despair.

It happens right outside Caesarea Philippi, the village 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. As today's encounter with Jesus begins, he is walking with his disciples when he asks them what people are saying about him. They give Jesus the Gallup Poll answer. They tell him some say he is Elijah, some say he is Jeremiah, some say he is one of the other prophets.

Then Jesus asks a very different question. Jesus asks what seems like his real question: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers Jesus with this incredible confession of faith. Peter says: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."

It must have felt great to answer Jesus' question, to make this clear confession of faith. I remember being in elementary school and my teacher, Miss Anderko, asked if someone could spell the word "arithmetic" and after several failed attempts by other students, she called on me. I remembered that you could spell it by taking the first letter of from each word of the sentence "A rat in the house may eat the ice cream." I spelled it correctly. I was very excited. She was, too, and even rewarded me with a dime for having the correct answer.

For Peter, he not only has the right answer, which might be exciting in and of itself, but even more, he is a disciple of the promised Messiah; he is walking and talking face to face with the son of the Living God. It can't get much better than that.

Peter's heart must have been filled with excitement, with wonder, with love, and with joy.

But just a moment later, his heart breaks.

It would be easy to assume that it breaks when Jesus rebukes him and says "Get behind me Satan". It would be incredibly hard for anyone to hear those words from Jesus directed at them.

I'm guessing, though, that Peter's heart was already broken at that point. Listen carefully to St. Matthew's gospel again: "Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed."

Just after Peter makes this great confession of faith, Jesus orders the disciples to tell no one what they consider to be the greatest news ever – that the Messiah has come. I can imagine it would have created a great deal of stress. But then Jesus begins to *show* them that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected, and then killed. Peter must have been filled with disappointment and despair. He must have been heart broken. It's so bad that I wonder if he doesn't even hear the rest of what Jesus says...that he will be raised on the third day.

Peter was stunned by Jesus' words. *The Savior of the World will suffer? The Messiah will die?* It doesn't make sense. Peter, like so many others of his day, is looking for someone to deliver the Israelites from Roman oppression just like Moses delivered them from Egypt. He expects the Messiah to be a descendent of mighty King David and come and overthrow Roman rule through power and might.

If you think about it, we really aren't that much different. We want God to overthrow the difficulties we face in life – whether they are financial, or they deal with our health, or with relationships. We want God through power and might to protect us from tragedy and help us get what we want. I don't know about you, but there have been many days when I want God to take COVID-19 away so things can be what be used to consider normal.

What God says to us, is what God said through the prophet Jeremiah in our first lesson for today: God says, "I am with you, to save you and to deliver you."

God became fully human in Jesus Christ and lived among us. Because of Jesus' life and ministry, we know that God understands our fear, knows our pains, and has borne our frustrations, failures, and disappointments...and, no matter what, God loves us for who we are.

Because of Jesus, we know that God has reached out to us through the waters of Holy Baptism and made us part of God's family forever and nothing can change that. We have been forgiven of our sins and given the gift of eternal life. God has sealed us by the Holy Spirit and marked us with the cross of Christ forever. Our worth and dignity come not from our accomplishments or our possessions or our talents, but from our identity as God's own beloved children.

Jesus invites us to find life's meaning and purpose in sharing the abundance of our lives with those around us, seeing in them our sisters and brothers in Christ.

When we are filled with discouragement and despair, when we are heartbroken, we, like St. Peter, can miss hearing God's promises. Jesus died on the cross, but then three days later, he rose to new life so that we might have new life here and now and for all eternity.

God promises to conquer hate with love. God promises to replace fear with courage. God promises to defeat death with resurrection life.

No matter what we face, no matter how we feel, God is with us. God continues to come to us with love and forgiveness and grace.

Each and every day, God comes to us and God keeps the promises made to us in Holy Baptism. God says, "You are mine. I love you. Nothing can separate you from my love."

These are not easy times. We live in times of uncertainty. We live in the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of racial injustice, of economic hardship (including unemployment, homelessness, and hunger), in the midst of divisiveness, in times of stress, anxiety, and high rates of depression. But in all these things, Jesus is present. Jesus is with us – holding us, encouraging us, giving us strength and peace – and Jesus is sending us to help others know by our presence that Jesus is also with them.

No matter what happens to us, no matter what evil we encounter or how powerful it is, there is nothing that can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Prayers

(Prayers are from ELCA Worship at Home for August 30, 2020 found at elca.org)

As we gather separately and together in the Spirit, let us pray for the needs of the world, responding to each petition with the words, "In your steadfast love, receive our prayer."

Caring for the church around the world, we pray —
for a spirit of ecumenical cooperation,
for the health of congregations during this difficult time,
for our bishops, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders, for these communities of faith in our synod and their leaders. . .

A brief silence.

Hear us, God our Savior;

In your steadfast love, receive our prayer.

Seeing before us your good creation, we pray —
for the repair of what we have harmed,
for polar ice,
for lands dealing with oppressive heat,
for fields ravaged by storms and fires. . .

A brief silence.

Hear us, God our Creator:

In your steadfast love, receive our prayer.

Facing so many international problems we pray —
for the strengthening of democracies,
for peaceful resolutions to conflicts,
for the people of Belarus, Lebanon, and Yemen,
for researchers seeking a vaccine,
for racial justice within our nation,
for our legislators to assist the lives of the poor,
for an ethical election campaign. . .

A brief silence.

Hear us, God our mighty Fortress;

In your steadfast love, receive our prayer.

Surrounded by people with great and hidden need we pray —
for families frightened by the uncertain future,
for those whose homes have burned down,
for students deprived of effective education,
for refugees and for prisoners. . .

A brief silence.

Hear us, God our Hope,

In your steadfast love, receive our prayer.

Aware of all who are sick and suffering we pray —
for all who are facing the coronavirus,
for those without medical care,
for those we remember here before you. . .

A brief silence.

Hear us, God our Healer;

In your steadfast love, receive our prayer.

Confident of your love for us, we pray also for ourselves:

A longer period of silence.

Hear us, God our Friend;

In your steadfast love, receive our prayer.

Mindful of all who have gone before us in the faith, we offer our thanks —
for all the saints famous and forgotten,
for medical workers who have died of the virus,

for friends and family we have loved,
for the promise of everlasting life with you. . .

A brief silence.

Hear us, God our Homeland;
In your steadfast love, receive our prayer.

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Then conclude with these prayers:

Let us pray.

A brief silence is kept before the prayer.

We thank you, O God, for your life-giving Word,
for calling creation into being,
declaring forgiveness from the cross,
and delivering the spirit of rebirth.
We praise you, O God, for your Word:
we praise you, O God, for your Word.

Your word is a lamp lighting our path,
a mirror reflecting our selves,
a shield providing us refuge,
a fire burning for justice and truth.
Your word is sweeter than honey:
it nourishes our bodies like milk,
it sustains your people like bread.
We receive your promises, more treasured than gold.
We bless you, O God, for your Word:
we bless you, O God, for your Word.

Open our ears to your prophets, apostles, and saints,
and to all the cries of the needy.
Breathe into your church the mighty Spirit of Christ,
that heeding your voice of beauty and power
we are strengthened to serve wherever we are called.

To you, Father, Son, and Spirit – the Source, Word, and Breath —
we offer our thanks for your life-giving Word:
we offer our thanks for your life-giving Word.

Amen.