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Mark 8:31-38
In the Wilderness: Suffering

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Mark 8:31-38 The Inclusive Bible

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Promised One had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and religious scholars, be put to death, and rise again three days later. Jesus said these things quite openly. Peter then took him aside and began to take issue with him. At this, Jesus turned around and, eyeing the disciples, reprimanded Peter: “Get out of my sight, you Satan! You are judging by human standards rather than by God’s!”

Jesus summoned the crowd and the disciples and said, “If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross and follow in my footsteps. If you would save your life, you’ll lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you’ll save it. What would you gain if you were to win the whole world but lose your self in the process? What can you offer in exchange for your soul? Whoever in this faithless and corrupt generation is ashamed of me and my words will find, in turn, that the Promised One and the holy angels will be ashamed of that person, when all stand before our God in glory.”

 There was once a small plane with 5 passengers on it. Halfway to their destination, the engines started sputtering and failing. The pilot came out from behind the curtain with a parachute pack on his back. He said, “Friends, I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is we have an engine malfunction and we're going down. The good news is there are several parachutes here along the wall. The bad news is that there are 5 of you and only 4 parachutes. So you'll have to work it out among yourselves.” With that, the pilot was out the door.

A woman leaped up. “I am one of the most prominent brain surgeons in Dallas. My patients depend on me.” She grabbed a parachute pack and leaped out. A man stood up and said, “I am a partner in a large law practice and the office would fall to pieces without me.” He grabbed a parachute pack and leaped out. Another man stood up and said, “I am the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I don't even want to mention it -- it would make you feel bad. But surely you understand that I must have a parachute.” He grabbed a pack and leaped out.

Now, there were only two people left on the plane now, a middle age United Methodist minister and a teenage boy. “Son,” said the minister, “you take the last parachute.” “You're young. You have your whole life ahead of you. I've had a good run, and I'll take the fall on this one. God bless you and safe landing.” The teenager looked up at the older man. “Thanks, pastor. That means a lot to me, really. But there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my backpack!”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Sometimes it feels that we are all in midair clinging to a sense of identity and purpose in life, as if our lives depended on it.[[2]](#footnote-2) In our scripture for today we hear Jesus tell Peter, the disciples, and the crowds our identity and purpose. “If you would save your life, you’ll lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you’ll save it.” Now that one sentence is a lot.

“If you would save your life, you’ll lose it.” You know when something horrible is happening and you have no other option but to cling to God? You feel so good because God feels so close and then you lose your grip and you feel like you are in a freefall and you are screaming so loudly and you forget that you have a parachute on your back because God is still with you. You may need stop whatever you are doing. Say a prayer. Find the quiet peace of God that surrounds you.

If you would save your life … Jesus could be thinking about the Pharisees. In the chapter before they are more concerned about Jesus’ disciples not washing their hands before they eat than they are about their own evil intentions. Jesus says, “It’s what comes out of a person that pollutes: obscenities, lusts, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, depravity, deceptive dealings, carousing, mean looks, slander, arrogance, foolishness.” (Mark 7:21)

If you would save your life … Maybe Jesus is thinking about James and John, the two disciples who fight over who will sit in the seat of honor in heaven (Mark 10:35). Maybe Jesus is thinking about the rich young man who wanted to inherit eternal life, but when Jesus said to sell what he owned and give the money to the poor, the man couldn’t do it (Mark 10:22).

If you would save your life … We can’t save our lives by making ourselves look better than other people. We can’t save our lives with possessions or perfectionism or prestige. We will never save ourselves when we are self-centered. We will save ourselves when we center ourselves on God, when we center our lives on helping our neighbors.

“If you would save your life, you’ll lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake, you’ll save it.” “If you lose your life for my sake, you’ll save it.” Sounds like Jesus might be talking about stopping the rat race, stopping the need to compare ourselves to others, stopping to breathe and find the peace of God that is with us and in us.

If you lose your life for my sake, you’ll save it … Jesus doesn’t mean we have to become a martyr or stay in an abusive relationship or live in fear. Jesus doesn’t mean we have to let people walk all over us. Jesus doesn’t mean we have to give up or settle with life as it is.

If you lose your life for my sake, you’ll save it … Jesus does mean that we have to lose our agenda, we have to let go of our desire for control, we have to let go of our wants. When we let go of our need to think first of ourselves, to center our lives on ‘me first,’ we will free ourselves to center our lives on God and to find our true identify and purpose.

It is about the things of people versus the things of God. People are about winning and comfort and being right and knowing the right stuff. We are about having prestige and power. God is about acting in love ALL the time.

Have there been times in your life when it is hard to love someone? When that happens to me, I usually discover that I am thinking about myself and I am not trying to listen and understand what that other person is thinking and feeling. I remember the first time someone told me that I would not be their pastor because I was a woman. The family hadn’t come to church in a while, and I was visiting someone on their street so I knocked on their front door. A member of the family opened the door and this person said that they had talked about it and prayed about it and that they decided that women should not be pastors. They weren’t mean or hateful. They wished me well and then shut the door.

Jesus says if I want to follow him I have to deny myself, take up my cross and follow in Jesus’ footsteps. I love Jesus. Do I love Jesus more than winning an argument? Do I love Jesus more than putting that relative that has a different political viewpoint than I do in their place? I may feel great afterwards, but would Jesus be proud of me? I don’t think so. God chooses human relationships, again and again and again. Maybe taking up the cross of Jesus, maybe losing my life for Jesus’ sake means realizing it is not all about ourselves. Lent is a time of wilderness, it is a time of suffering, it is a time of denial of the self. Maybe this Lent we need to deny ourselves when we think we can survive on our own. Maybe this Lent we need to think about our connectedness with one another and deny ourselves when we think we don’t need community.[[3]](#footnote-3) We need to always remember that we are never enough alone. We all need God in our lives. We all need other people in our lives.

We all have a deep human need to belong. We need one another, desperately.[[4]](#footnote-4) Especially folks who look differently than us and have different viewpoints than our own. In Les Miserables Jean Valjean has been in prison for 19 years and he cannot imagine how to lead his life in any other way than through theft and lies. A Bishop shows kindness toward him by giving him dinner and a room for the night. Jean Valjean is shocked and overwhelmed that the Bishop has shown him such kindness, but he can’t stop himself from stealing. The police catch him and bring him back to the Bishop and he says that everything Jean Valjean took was a gift and then he brings over the silver candlesticks and says that he meant to give those to him too! The Bishop says the candlesticks can be used to make an honest man out of Jean Valjean. The candlesticks are a reminder of grace and mercy and the first time someone treated him like a human being. They are a symbol of new beginnings.

To live a human life means we are all going to struggle, we are all going to hurt, we are all going to experience loss and brokenness. We may want to hide our brokenness from other people, but losing your life means letting go of the masks that we hide behind and sharing who we are with one another, struggles and all. It means being vulnerable with people. It means listening. Sometimes it means accepting help. When we are broken or hurting, sometimes we are tempted to struggle alone. Those are the times when we need God—and other people—the most.

In our scripture Peter knew that God was found with strength. I mean we say God is omnipotent after all, that sounds pretty strong! Peter felt like grief and loss and betrayal and suffering and death were to be avoided at all costs. But Jesus shows us by the cross that there is no place God refuses to go to love us and give us new life.[[5]](#footnote-5) God is with us in our brokenness, God is with us when we mess up, and God is calling us to life and courage in and through the resurrection. If you lose your life for my sake, you’ll save it… I save my life when I see the humanity in someone that I disagree with. I save my life when I pray for someone that drives me crazy. I save my life when I don’t give up on people. I save my life when I stand with people instead of stand over them.[[6]](#footnote-6) I save my life when I try to learn from others instead of teach others.

What unites us is our suffering. Genesis 50 Joseph told his brothers after they sold him into slavery in a fit of jealous rage, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good…” Meant is the Hebrew word for wove. You wove evil but God rewove it together for good. Joseph deposited all the tattered shreds of his life into the careful hands of God, who just picked up the threads of hate and deceit and abandonment and injustice and refashioned them into a truly beautiful story. God used all the same threads. God didn’t create a replica. God didn’t start from scratch. God didn’t throw the destroyed original in the trash and begin again with all new material. It took 22 years but God rewove what was torn into a stronger version than the first.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Like that Methodist minister who needed a parachute, we will save ourselves when we center our lives on God, when we think first of others instead of ourselves. There is nothing too broken that God cannot mend and redeem. Really. Nothing. God can make anything beautiful again and use it to heal us and make us sturdier. God can resurrect our lives.[[8]](#footnote-8) Life is hard and until God reweaves all things, people are dying for a cold cup of water.[[9]](#footnote-9) May we be people who bring others water. Amen.

1. http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2012/03/finders-weepers-losers-keepers-alyce-mckenzie-03-01-2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2012/03/finders-weepers-losers-keepers-alyce-mckenzie-03-01-2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-2-b-take-up-your-cross/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-2-b-take-up-your-cross/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-2-b-take-up-your-cross/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.davidlose.net/2018/02/lent-2-b-take-up-your-cross/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hatmaker, Jen. “Of Mess and Moxie.” P. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hatmaker, Jen. “Of Mess and Moxie.” P. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hatmaker, Jen. “Of Mess and Moxie.” P. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)