

Sermons for the Journey

The Rev. Duncan Burns

Lent 2 – Year B

Sunday, February 25, 2018

I love movies that have a plot twist at the end. Maybe you remember the film, The Sixth Sense. The film tells the story of a troubled boy named Cole, who thinks he is able to see and talk to the dead and a child psychologist played by Bruce Willis who tries to help him solve a crime committed by Vincent. It is only at the end of the movie that Bruce Willis notices his wife has his wedding ring, when he suddenly discovers he has not been wearing his ring. He remembers what Cole said about ghosts and realizes that he was actually killed by Vincent and was unknowingly dead the entire time he was working with Cole. The ending was a real aha moment for the majority of viewers.

Jesus has just asked the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27)
Peter’s answer was, “You are the Messiah.” (Mark 8:28)

God created the stars, the galaxy, and the whole universe. God created everything that is. If God did not create them, then where did all this stuff come from? The Bible tells us that God created people in God’s own image. God created everything out of nothing or *ex nihilo*. We do not deny the Big Bang or science, but questions still remain. From before the world was created, God had a plan. God’s interaction with God’s people is recorded in the bible before people could write. Jesus came to make us right in God’s eyes. Born in a humble manger, Jesus was not what people were expecting in a Messiah. Jesus touched the dead and the leper and healed them. Jesus ate with tax collectors, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, healed on the Sabbath, and lived a life of compassion to those in need. Jesus died on a cross that we might have life and live it abundantly. Jesus was one plot twist after another.

This was not easy for the disciples. Peter understands that Jesus is the Messiah, but does not understand what that word means. Jesus told the disciples that the son of man must undergo suffering, rejection, be killed and after three days rise again. This came as a shock to his disciples. Peter wasn’t ready to let go of his own expectations yet. Maybe he thought Jesus, the messiah, was going to follow the Davidic tradition and be a great king. The term Messiah means Savior of the people. Maybe Peter thought that by being a good follower of Jesus he would receive salvation. but Peter did not have any clue of what was about to transpire. He could only see the temporal life in which he lived. In Romans Paul writes, “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.” (Romans 3:21-25)

Has everyone taken my quiz in the chalice?

“Suppose that you were to die tonight and stand before God, and God were to say to you, “Why should I let you into heaven? What would you say?”

1. Because I have tried my best to be a good Christian.
2. Because I believe in God and try to do God’s will.
3. Because I believe in God with all my heart. (Romans 1-7 For You)”

Timothy Keller tells us that the answer is a complete surprise to most of us. Let me explain. “Abraham grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.’” Before Mount Sinai, Moses and the law, Abraham was made righteous through God’s plan of salvation. We do not have to earn the love of God, but we are asked to accept that as part of God’s plan, we were created in God’s image, are loved by God, and are forgiven of our sins through the blood of Christ on the cross.

So Peter was confused because he did not understand God’s plan and rebuked Jesus. Jesus replied, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up my cross and follow me.” Peter must have thought, “What, we are not going to sit at your right hand on the throne?” Becoming a follower (disciple) of Jesus is going to mean giving something up for somebody else.

It turns out that Jesus is the suffering Savior as described in Isaiah 53. Following Christ isn’t about getting something in return and Jesus isn’t some evangelist trying to cheat you out of your money so he can drive a Bentley. Jesus wants you to give up yourself for the sake of others. Jesus wants to usher in this kingdom of justice and peace through self giving. But Jesus tells the disciples that following him is going to cost them something. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that there is no such thing as cheap grace. Discipleship “is costly because it calls us to follow... it is costly because it costs a person their life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life... Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and contrite heart.” (The Cost of Discipleship p. 45)

For me, the decision twenty years ago for my wife and I to quit our lucrative jobs and move into a 800 square foot apartment with three small children at seminary for three years was a lot to ask. But twenty years ago the retail business was on fire with the .com surge and the stock market was exploding. This week, the 267 department store chain that was part of the company I worked for (that sold SAKS Fifth Avenue to Hudson Bay), declared bankruptcy and now sells for 9 cents per share. What a surprise ending for my vocation, my company goes belly up and I’m here with all you fine folks doing exactly what I love. Sometimes I think God saves us from ourselves out of a divine love and compassion and not a day goes by that I don’t thank Jesus Christ for my salvation.

This past week, high school students from Florida went to Washington to ask why they have to continue to live in fear. How can we allow one massacre after another of our

children in schools all over this country? Why can't our representatives work together to make our kids safe. There are many reasons for these shootings and no one solution will solve the problem. But we have to all get involved. I wrote every one of my elected officials in New York and Washington and asked them to make our kids safety their top priority. I ask our youth group and all our students to march next month and make their voices heard.

Jesus had a righteous indignation against injustice and it costs him his life. I ask every person in this congregation to write every elected official in New York and Washington and ask them to work together on a solution. I don't care if you belong to the NRA or the ACLU. It is time to put politics aside and work together on issues like this, racial reconciliation, and the opioid crises.

We are setting up several events to bring the opioid crisis and racial reconciliation issues to our community in Huntington. Jesus shows us in the Gospel that we need to adjust our thinking. We cannot continue to be nasty to each other because of our differences of opinion. We need to realize that being a follower of Jesus means giving of ourselves for the sake of others.

I heard about a banner on a church in New York City that said, "Be careful of the way you live, it is the only gospel most people will ever read!" My prayer for all of us is that we will be transformed by the love of Jesus Christ. My prayer for this parish is that we will follow the path of self giving love of Jesus Christ.

With the love and compassion of Jesus Christ and the saving grace of God, who knows maybe we surprise the entire world by dealing with our opioid crisis, our massacres in our schools, and racism in America.

I don't want to spoil the Gospel this Lenten season, but to Peter's amazement the story isn't going to end as he imagines, and I think you are going to like the plot twist on Easter Morning. **Amen.**