



Grace Is the Whole Story

TEXT
Isaiah 6:1–8
Luke 22:54–62

November 18, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Sometimes we miss it a bit. Even when we are trying to do that which is good, we can still mess things up. Even things we care about the most. And like Isaiah, all we can say is, “Woe is me for I am lost.” Confession ... naming our failure ... it’s important.

But the gospel story never stops there. Isaiah confesses, and angels bring burning coals to his lips to cleanse, to heal, to redeem. It’s a metaphor of purifying his life, a work of grace to make right that which Isaiah can’t make right.

Walter was my childhood friend. His parents played bridge with my parents. They would play in our downstairs den, leaving Walter and me the run of the upstairs. One night he asked, “What’s this?”

“It’s the switch that turns on our attic fan,” I said. He flipped the switch, and the fan began to whirr.

As you know, attic fans work by drawing in outside air through open windows and screened doors. At least that’s how it works when windows and screened doors are open. But this was February. The house was locked up tight, and therefore the only place that big

fan could draw air from outside was the chimney. I didn’t know that, but I learned it right away.

In just a few seconds, the fan had done a thorough job of cleaning our chimney. The ashes from the fire a few nights previous were completely removed, and the ash hung in the air. It looked as if we had stepped into one of those shake-up snow globes. He said, “I’m in trouble, aren’t I?”

I said, “You don’t know the half of it.” It was at that moment he remembered there was a fireplace in the den downstairs as well, and our parents were now playing bridge in a shake-up snow globe.

My mother came upstairs. She didn’t say a word. She handed me the Endust and cloth and told Walter where the vacuum was. Then she said they would finish their game over at Walter’s house. Call when we had everything cleaned up. It was a long night.

Sometimes we mess things up, and if we can fix them, we should. It’s not enough just to say, “Gosh, sorry about that. My bad!” No, when the wrong is ours, we should do everything we can to fix it.

But there are times when we fall short, when we mess things

up, and we can’t make it right. We leave things too broken to repair. *Woe is me, for I am lost.*

Scripture tells us this story of Peter’s denial. It’s a stunning story of failure. Here Peter, the rock, the one who is called to deny himself and follow Jesus, instead denies Jesus and follows his fears. This is the worst moment in Peter’s life. And the gospel writers have written it down to make sure the church remembers. Luke turns the camera to this moment of failure because he can’t tell the story of grace without it.

Peter was following Jesus. Following is what a disciple is called to do. You remember the first thing Jesus says to Peter: “Come and follow me.” So, when Jesus walked up the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter followed him. When Jesus walked by the sea, Peter followed him. When Jesus walked *on* the sea, Peter followed him. It’s what a disciple does.

But Peter was following *at a distance*. If I understand the text, this is not about geography. The distance is not measured in feet or yards or miles. The distance is found in the heart. Distance allows Peter to maintain some control — to be in, but not all in. He follows at a distance

because he's afraid. He follows, but at a distance, because he has his doubts. I love the honesty of this story.

Too often faith is presented as belief or nonbelief, in or out, yes or no. But that's really not the truth of it, is it? I don't know many people who believe or don't believe. Mostly, I know folks who struggle to believe. They hold fragile faith, growing faith, withering faith, battered faith, striving faith, searching faith. We believe, help our unbelief. We follow this Gospel life, but often we follow at a distance. Am I making sense to you?

Following at a distance, Peter swears he does not know what we know he knows. It was the worst moment of his life, for he has just messed up the relationship he cares about the most, and he can't fix it.

And Luke tells us, in this moment Jesus "turned and looked at Peter." The words of denial are still in his mouth, and his eyes meet the eyes of Christ. It is a look that says, "I know you. I know the truth of you. You cannot hide." No wonder Peter runs away and weeps.

My friend Michael Lindvall tells of the Rev. Mitchell Simpson.¹ One Sunday morning, Mitch put his wireless microphone on and accidentally bumped it into the "on" position. As the congregation gathered in the sanctuary, they could hear him rustling papers on his desk. From his office window, he saw the Bengtsons. They were Congregationalists, and everyone knew the Congregationalist

church was in the middle of a brouhaha.

Mitch opened his office door. He saw Sam and said, "Sam, the Bengtsons are visiting today. Be nice to 'em." He closed his office door and said to a very attentive congregation, "Maybe some angry Congregationalists will fire up this worn-out congregation." Rev. Simpson had been drinking coffee since six o'clock that morning, so he stepped into the men's room. You will want to know that the microphone works well throughout the church building.

Everyone in the sanctuary lifted their heads to watch the speakers, like people in the elevator look at the numbers. Only when he stepped into the sanctuary did he realize that he had been broadcasting live and in person. They had heard his careless comments and they had heard, well, they had heard him. It was more than he could take. He resigned the next week.

We don't want to be fully known. We prefer an online presence that we can curate, rather than the whole heart to be known. But Peter did not have that luxury. In his worst moment, Jesus turns and looks at him.

I have assumed that the look Jesus gives Peter is a look of shame, a look of disappointment. But there is another way to interpret this moment. If I understand the text, there is something else taking place.

More than judgment, when Jesus turns and looks to this stumbling, failing disciple who

follows only at a distance, it seems to me that Jesus bridges the distance. He crosses the gap that Peter cannot cross. The look of Jesus is not so much a look of judgment, as it is a look of grace. The look of Jesus dissolves the distance. Jesus says to Peter, *I know the worst moment in your life, and I still refuse to give up on you. When you cannot come to me, I will come to you. My grace will not leave you behind. There is no failure in you that will cause me to let go of you.*

Grace is not some sweet attribute of God. Grace is the tenacious faithfulness of God as God holds on to us in the very moment when we give God reason to let go of us. In grace, God knows the worst in us and holds on to the best in us. That's the whole story of the Gospel.

When I was in high school, I had a job selling shoes. I was driving home on I-285 one afternoon. It had been drizzly all day, and the road was slick. A few cars in front of me locked up. There was a lot of swerving, and I ended up being number three in a four-car pileup. No one was hurt. There were lots of blue flashing lights. I asked a policeman if I could call my mother. I walked down the embankment to a Union 76 station and stood in one of those Clark Kent phone booths and called home. My mother answered and I said, "Mom."

I don't know how it is that moms can tell something is wrong, but they can. I just said, "Mom."

She said, "Tell me where you are. I'll be right there."

She didn't say, "What did you do this time?" There was no "I've told you to be more careful. Do you have any idea how this will affect your insurance?" None of that. I'm not saying we didn't have that conversation later. But at the moment, it was just, "Tell me where you are. I'll be right there."

Grace is like that. When we have messed it up, and we can't make it right, God says, "Tell me where you are. I'll be right there."

The reason Luke tells this story is because it is our story. I don't know your worst moment. But know that the eyes of Christ see us.

It is a look that says, I know you. I know the whole truth of you. And that gaze closes the distance we create. No distance is so far that we fall beyond the gaze of our Savior. He looks at us and dissolves the distance.

Grace is not some sweet attribute of God. Grace is the tenacious faithfulness of God as God holds on to us in the very moment when we give God reason to let go of us. In grace, God knows the worst in us and God still holds on to the best in us. And that is the whole story of the Gospel.

¹This story is found in Lindvall's *Good News from North Haven*, pp. 133–139. The telling here is paraphrased from Lindvall.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.