

Exactly ten days ago I happened to be talking to my father on the telephone – he reminded me that that day, September 3, 2009 was the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of War between Britain and Germany and of course there had been some media coverage. My dad was seven in 1939, it was a Sunday. Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlin addressed the nation over the radio just after 11:00 a.m. and in somber tones had uttered the fateful words, "... this country is at war with Germany." My dad – who at times doesn't recall what he did last week – went on to say how he recalled that day so clearly - walking with his mother to Church where the Minister offered a very brief prayer and sent the stunned congregation home. These were fateful words that forever changed his life, and of course the life of the world.

We can recall other fateful words from that period that also forever changed the lives of many– "Yesterday, December 7, 1941 - a date which will live in infamy - the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan." Or from another time some of us may well recall watching or listening to hear what our lottery number would be in the draft.

Fateful words that shape, define, change, forever alter our lives need not concern world events, such fateful words can often be very quiet and personal – "Your cancer has returned." "I am sorry to have to tell you that the mill is to be closed". Fateful words can also concern happier matters: "Will you marry me?" "I am pregnant!" "Your college application has been accepted." "The job is yours if you want it!" For me recent fateful words include, "Hello Jim, this is Keith Morton from OAPC – the congregation voted Yes!"

Today we have to deal with some very fateful words from Peter about Jesus, fateful words that forever changed our world. In response to a question from Jesus, "Who do you say I am?" Peter proclaims, "Jesus, You are the Messiah! You are the Christ, God's Anointed One!" These fateful words, the heart of today's text are the fulcrum on which Mark's gospel turns toward its climactic moment.

A huge part of the ongoing drama in Mark's Gospel is over whether or not the disciples are going to understand what Jesus is saying and showing them, about whether or not they are going to get it! Up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has been trying – with mixed success - to get the disciples to see that God's Kingdom has drawn near and will forever change everything. From this point onwards there will be a greater urgency and a new focus as Jesus teaches the disciples. Now, all eyes will turn to Jerusalem and what will happen there. To underline this change Mark gives us a geographical clue, signaling a shift in the story. Jesus has been teaching in and north of Galilee. But from now on we will discover that Jesus is now on the way south, always on the road to Jerusalem with his not-yet-convinced followers in tow.

Following on Peter's words Jesus uses the teachable moment - He tells Peter and all of them "Hush y'all and listen!" Jesus informs them about the implication of this declaration. That he will face suffering and rejection by the elders of Israel, the chief priests and the scribes; that the elders – the leaders of his people, the priests, the worship leaders and the interpreters of his people's Law – all of them will disown him. And he will be killed – implying the involvement of the only group entitled to pass the death penalty– the Roman Empire.

All of this, all that Jesus was saying was too much for Peter, Peter finds all of this difficult to hear and believe. He cannot make the link between Jesus as Messiah with what he hears Jesus say. Peter's brain was like what happens to our TV screens when we try out some of those different screen ratios on our

DVD player or when we attempt to upgrade our computer monitors – until we get things right the picture is very fuzzy, distorted, out of shape, unclear, it makes no sense, it may even go blank.

There is an interesting contrast as this scene unfolds. Mark tells us that Jesus spoke openly, to the entire group. Not liking what he is hearing, Peter adopts an all together different approach – Peter takes Jesus aside! What a turn of events! One thing if Jesus took Peter aside, quite another thought, laughable, poignant, as Peter takes Jesus aside! As if somehow Peter knows what Jesus didn't, as if Peter had the insider information, the hot stock tip to pass on to Jesus, as if Peter knew more than the one whom he had just declared was the Messiah, the Christ of his people. Peter suffers from his own personal version of "foot-in-mouth" disease.

What possessed Peter to "take Jesus aside" and put him right?

Was Peter thinking: "Jesus you are a good man, you talk about God, you help others, you heal the sick, feed the hungry – are you outta your mind that you are going to be treated so badly? Have more faith in human nature!"

Or was Peter thinking: "Jesus your mission is not about politics or power – so why worry what those "inside the beltway" might be thinking or doing – you don't have anything to worry about them privileged folks in their palaces and penthouses and offices and courtrooms."

Or was Peter thinking: "Jesus if you are gonna suffer like you say you are – chances are I am going to have to suffer also – I didn't sign off for that, truth be told I am not sure I am ready for that!"

Notice that Jesus did not linger alone with Peter but immediately includes the Twelve in his rebuke to Peter for this kind of talk was wrong and needed to be confronted publicly, and deliberately. Just as Jesus had argued his case with the Tempter in the wilderness now he faced off with the tempter on the road around Caesarea Philippi. Eyeing all of them including Peter, Jesus said "If you are to be my followers you must – you must – it is inevitable, it is necessary – you must deny yourself and take up your cross."

Or how does it sound put this way? "Don't seek self-gratification, but accept the risks of proclaiming the arrival of God's Kingdom and exposing the violence and evil of the religion, politics, and economics of the day." Put this way helps us remember that in the first century world "cross" had but one connotation: on it, on the cross, Rome executed those who threatened "the way things are." Of all the people who have ever lived Jesus is the one who most threatens "the way things are" and calls us as followers to trust our Savior, to follow our Lord, to go the way of Jesus!

My friends, people of God gathered here in Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church, people of God listening on television, we are now drawn into this exchange and conversation with Jesus, we too are invited to trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord, we are even now being asked to deny ourselves and take up our crosses!

I ask you to listen to this brief, insightful story from the high mountains of Nepal:

"In the cool air of the mountaintops a huge wax god sat in solitary splendor. Generations of villagers from the valley below had made their way up the mountain to worship at the shrine. There came a

time, when some decided that it would be easier, and more convenient, if they brought the god down from his chilly citadel and placed him in the center of their marketplace, where they passed every day. Worship would be less of a bother to them. And so this is what was done, the wax god was moved down into the village.

In the heat of the following days, the wax god softened and sagged. And the villagers realized that they could now make a few changes in their god. Some had always thought his face was too stern and so they were able to mold a delightful smile on his face. After just a few days the god looked just the way they wanted him to look. With the arrival of the summer heat, the wax god sagged more and more, little by little people began to take away little pieces of wax that they were able to use to light their homes. Soon all the wax, all the god was gone.”

It was Peter’s temptation, it has always been the church’s temptation, it is our temptation, to attempt to mold Jesus into the sort of Messiah we want, and hope for and imagine we need. It is our temptation to seek to make God into the God who looks out for people like us, who disturbs us not at all. But when we mold God into our image and use God to fill our needs, we soon find we have no God at all.

This then we will not do, we will not seek to mold or frame God according to our ideas, rather we will let our vision of God be fully shaped and defined by the call of Jesus on our lives. To understand what it means to be defined by the call of Jesus on our lives will be the message and the motivation of this year’s Stewardship Theme. “Stepping Up... Reaching Out...” is the theme we begin today – providing each and all of us with a focused opportunity to get our lives in order and commit to live as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ!

Whisper it - Stewardship season last all year round – every week is Stewardship Sunday because every week we need to be focused on what we need to do and be so that the life of God will be seen in and through our lives, how it is we live and act, the priority we place on worship and service, how we act to and with one another, how we relate to and with all our God-given neighbors around the world, across the street, around the communion table or the dinner table. Ultimate Stewardship is not about offerings and pledge cards and budgets – it is about being confronted by the limitless love that God has for the world and for us all, it is about hearing and responding to God’s call upon our lives – upon our time, upon our skills, upon our wealth, upon the totality of our lives – the lives for which Jesus offered up His life!

The poet John Donne offered a wonderful summary of not only Jesus’ life and ministry, but also, it seems, of the Gospel of Mark. Donne wrote, “The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr. He found Golgotha even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then the straws were almost as sharp as thorns, and the manger as uneasy at first as his cross at last. His birth and death were but one continual act, and his Christmas Day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of one and the same day.”

From our own time, Preacher, Fred Craddock, in a sermon on this passage, described losing life to save it in this way:

"I think it means to be willing to empty your pockets for somebody else's children.

I think it means to treat as father and mother those who are not really your mother and father. I think it means to claim as brother and sister people to whom you are not kin. I think it means to reach out and touch untouchable people. I think it means to sit at table with people who live far outside the social

circle of some of our friends. It means to witness to Jesus Christ when evangelism is being laughed at everywhere. It means...to speak the gospel as though something were at stake"

I would therefore submit that Peter is neither Hero nor villain. He is just you and me – sometimes we see clearly, other times we don't; sometimes faith seems to come easy, other times we don't want to face the pain or the cost. True faith does not bring Jesus into conformity with what we want or think or imagine we need. True faith is not shaping Jesus to be what we like as in the story of the wax god. Rather true faith demands that we change to be like Jesus, the Messiah, the suffering servant Messiah, willing to lay down our lives for the One who laid down His life for us, willing to lay down our lives for the life of the world for which Jesus lived and died.

Stepping Up... Reaching Out... offers all us a call to faithful, fruitful living, stepping up as we commit our time and resources for the purposes of God in the word, reaching out in love and faith and prayer – taking up our cross - following Jesus. Being true to the heart of our faith, being true to our Lord.
Amen.