

The Second Sunday in Lent  
Grace & Holy Trinity Cathedral  
March 17, 2019

May I speak to you in the name of one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

There may be no more popular conversation starter in 21<sup>st</sup> century America than the rather simple, “so, what do you do?” Just about any time you or I meet someone new, the question is bound to come up. It’s really a matter of when, not if. One reason for this, of course, is that what we do for a living, how we spend our days, is increasingly bound up with our sense of self. Living as we do in a culture that prizes achievement, talent, and innovation, our professional identities have grown, and are continuing to grow, in relation to our larger identities. Many of us find ourselves living in the shadow of an unspoken, yet very real, principle: we are what we do. By that I mean we daily are experiencing a cultural pressure to define ourselves in terms of vocational success or failure. If our careers thrive, we thrive. But if our careers falter, then we must falter. This is, I am convinced, an exhausting way to live, which is why I suspect so many Americans are, well, exhausted. And, yet, my hope is that we here as a community can experience and embody an alternative to this ever-present cultural reality. In Christ, it is not what we do that matters, but rather whose we are. In Christ, we are infinitely more than what we do. And the more we are willing to embrace these fundamental truths, the more our lives will change.

I thought I would spend a few moments talking about the value we place on what we do so as to offer up the following observation: namely, I think it’s somewhat ironic that for as much as you and I talk about our vocations, we seldom talk about Jesus’ vocation. We all know, of course, that before he started his public ministry, Jesus was a carpenter. But what about after the start of

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his ministry? If you ever got the chance to ask, how do you think Jesus would answer the question, “so, what do you do?”

One challenge in answering this question is that there are several options available to us, and so if you were to ask different people this question, you would likely get different answers. During his public ministry, Jesus was a miracle worker, and one of the very first times he let slip his true-identity was when, at an ordinary wedding, he turned water into wine. More than just a miracle worker, Jesus was a healer, and his countless acts of divine healing dominate much of the Gospel narratives. Jesus was also a teacher, and when He wasn't healing someone, he was often speaking in parables and other stories about the Kingdom of God. Finally, as He makes clear in today's Gospel passage, Jesus was also a prophet, sent by God to proclaim a message of judgment, hope, and, ultimately, liberation.

Importantly, how you or I would answer the question of Jesus' vocation might also vary from week to week. That is, when we read or hear about parables, we will inevitably think of Jesus as our teacher. When we hear about miracles, we will inevitably think of Jesus as our healer. And in those moments when Jesus truly challenges us, turning our world upside down, we might get a glimpse of Jesus the prophet, who points us time and again to a reality so different from our own.

While this tendency to imagine Jesus as someone who wore different hats during different parts of his ministry is natural, the words we just heard from Luke should really caution us away from this way of thinking. In today's Gospel, a few Pharisees decide to warn Jesus about King Herod, and the fact that Herod is looking to have Jesus killed. Jesus, of course, seems entirely

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undisturbed by the warning, and he hints that the Pharisees might actually have things backwards. Ironically, instead of fearing death, Jesus seems to be preparing for it. Instead of caring about Herod, Jesus casually dismisses him as a fox. And instead of running from Jerusalem, Jesus has set his eyes towards the holy city, intent to carry his prophetic message to its logical conclusion, a martyr's death in that place where prophets go to die.

What is especially interesting about this interaction is the way that Jesus describes his work, his vocation. Here again are Jesus' words: "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." "On the third day, I finish my work."

What Jesus, then, is making clear is that his work, his vocation, is very much a seamless thing, a mission that has many facets but just a single goal. Jesus' public ministry—his acts of mercy and his teachings about God's Kingdom—have led Him to this point, a road that leads to Jerusalem and, ultimately, a painful and unjust execution. Put simply, Jesus' came to this earth in order to die. Yes, Jesus preached and he taught, he fed and he healed, but Jesus did these things that they might be signs pointing us to his final work, his passion on the cross and his rising from the dead. Indeed, the cross of Christ casts its shadow not simply on Good Friday, or this season of Lent, but rather on the entire arc of the Christian life. In many ways, to be a Christian is to have the same mind as Jesus; that is, to have a willingness to turn our eyes to Jerusalem and to walk with Jesus into death and ultimately new life.

The Second Sunday in Lent  
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March 17, 2019

An interesting question to ask is how precisely Jesus' ministry can be thought of as a seamless garment together with his death and resurrection. That is, why does Jesus describe himself as casting out demons and performing cures one day and finishing his work in Jerusalem the next?

The challenge in answering that question, I think, has something to do with our complicated relationship with life and with death. We 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans tend to think of death as a problem to be solved, or barring that, a problem simply to be avoided. Thus, we thirst for longer and healthier lives. Unfortunately, while we continue to reap the benefits of our scientific advances—with Western countries enjoying longer life spans than ever before—we are nonetheless as frightened and anxious as ever. One reason for this anxiety is that by reducing death to a scientific challenge, we ignore the spiritual and theological dimensions to death. Put simply, death is not an ailment in need of a cure. Rather, it is a necessary consequence of our place in this universe. It is a necessary consequence of fallen people who live in a fallen world. In the letter to the Hebrews, death is described as a power, held by the devil, which ensnares us in fear, such that we die daily, long before we ever take our final breath.

Standing in sharp contrast to this, is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus in his public ministry was literally brimming with life and love. His touch brought healing. More than his touch, a brush against his garment or a word from his mouth was enough to cure a disease or even raise someone from the dead. But even so, these actions by Jesus were nothing more than the first advances into enemy territory, much like an opening move in a game of chess. After all, what does it mean to cure an illness, or even raise someone from the dead, if the end of it all is simply delayed, or made a little

The Second Sunday in Lent  
Grace & Holy Trinity Cathedral  
March 17, 2019

less burdensome? No, for Jesus, the final move of his life and ministry—the completion of all that work—was nothing less than a conquering of death itself.

To conquer death, of course, Jesus had to die. Offering much more than a touch or a word, Jesus walked the path of mortality to its bitter end, and the body that had been overflowing with life went briefly dark. But death, the power of the devil, was not enough to overcome a life that shared its nature with nothing less God. And because Jesus was human too, possessing a mortal body like each one of us, the resurrection power of Jesus was able to become our power too. Through the cross, Jesus saves us from the permanence of death, the shadow of death, the fear of death. Through the cross, Jesus heals us, giving us a new perspective on the reality of our own deaths, one marked by hope instead of despair, songs of praise instead of cries of lament. And through the cross, the work that began with teaching and miracles and cures finds its end, finds its completion.

And so, I will conclude by circling back to one of my initial questions about vocation. While I cannot say for sure, I suspect that if you were able to ask Jesus what he did, what his vocation was, he would tell you that he's your Savior. *Amen.*