

Listen to the End

(Mark 8:27-38)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 16, 2018

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

By show of hands, how many of you have seen the movie “Patton”? It is hard to believe that that film and I are contemporaries; each of us turned 48 this year. This is an incredible movie – and one of my favorites – and in my personal opinion George C. Scott’s work in the title role is one of if not **the** finest performances of his career. (I also think he shines as Ebenezer Scrooge in a 1984 adaptation of “A Christmas Carol,” but that is a different discussion for a different season.)

In the opening sequence of the film, Patton is portrayed giving a talk to the troops of the Third Army. It is intended to be a motivational speech to inspire them to face the difficult work that lay ahead of them in the war in Europe. In his remarks, Patton says the following: “Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser.”

Loving a winner and not tolerating a loser. This line came to mind as I was reading today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark earlier this week. As we well know, this scene takes place in the shadow of an oppressive regime, a time of difficult rule by the Romans and their allies among the local authorities. It had been nearly 100 years since the Roman general Pompey and his legions had conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC and subjugated Israel as a part of the empire.

The Jewish people were crying out for a messiah, someone to drive out the invaders and restore their independence. In the context of the line from “Patton,” Israel desperately wanted a winner and was quite tired of losing. Now, in this man Jesus who they had been following, the 12 thought they had finally found the one to fulfill that promise. Here, they thought, is the winner who will bring all of our people’s suffering to an end. Peter was certainly quite firm in his belief, answering Jesus quickly when asked about his identity by saying “You are the Messiah!”

But then in the very next instant, everything changed. This man who Peter had just declared through his faith to be the Messiah now was quite unexpectedly telling them he would face suffering and death. The very one who many were expecting to help them win the race against oppression was instead sharing a vision that seemed to point to anything but victory. The message of hope certainly seemed to be coming off the rails.

Peter, of course, reacted to this based on instinct rather than vision ... and he began to rebuke Jesus. What in the world might **that** have looked like? In the parallel version of this narrative in

the Gospel of Matthew, we know that Peter said, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”¹ Perhaps he said something similar to that here, or maybe it was something even more passionate or insubordinate. I can certainly picture the other 11 and anyone else who may have been within earshot cringing at this scene, wondering to themselves “What is Peter ***thinking?***” All we ***do*** know is that he quickly went from praise to criticism – and the subsequent rebuke from Jesus was even swifter.

Now on the one hand some may be inclined to think that none of this ***needed*** to happen. Peter did not have to make the mistake that he did when he stopped listening to Jesus’ words before the full message had taken he root. All he heard was that Jesus would be rejected, suffer and die. What he ***missed*** is that he said he would rise again after three days. Had this wonderfully impetuous and emotional disciple been able to keep focus for just a moment more, he would have heard ***everything*** Jesus was trying to say.

But that is not what happened, and because Peter jumped the gun we have been give this powerful lesson. And I think the lesson is this: in whatever situation we find ourselves in whatever sense of sorrow or hopelessness we may be feeling ... whatever fear or anxiety, those moments are ***not*** the end of the story. You can go back through any story in the Old or New Testaments and get to a certain point where things should have ended ... and then you can reflect on the fact the story went on.

Abraham was instructed to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice to God; what if he had not stopped to hear the heavenly voice instructing him to lower the knife? Moses had fled Egypt, a prince outcast for raising his hand against the violence of an Egyptian taskmaster; what if he had not stopped to answer the voice whispering to him from the fiery bush? What if Mary had not listened to all of the words of the archangel, or Joseph had not listened to all that God warned him of in his dream?

In each instance, the stories of these men and women had not ended – and they knew their journeys would continue in remarkable new directions because they heard ***all*** that God had told them. And even though Peter did not hear everything Jesus was trying to tell him on this day in Caesarea Philippi, and despite missing the important end in much of what Jesus shared during his earthly ministry, he eventually learned to wait until he heard ***everything***. Peter, the flawed disciple and imperfect friend on whom the Church would one day be built, quit stopping in the middle and began to listen to the end.

The great New York Yankees catcher and part-time philosopher Yogi Berra got ribbed many times in his life for the often wacky things he said. Hardly the most elegant of speakers, many of his more famous sayings were based on a sort of folksy interpretation of what he observed. One of his most famous, one which I would be willing to bet you have heard many times, is that “[I]t ain’t over ‘til it’s over.”

¹ Matthew 16:22 (NRSV).

It is a line that, while silly on the surface, will most definitely preach. It is a line that is incredibly significant. And it is a line that I think would have fit perfectly into today's narrative from Mark. I can easily hear Jesus adding it on as a postscript to what he says to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. And besides, it ain't over 'til it's over."

We should not allow ourselves to get fully bogged down in the difficulties we experience. As difficult as it often is, we should not allow ourselves to get stuck in the mire of the difficult moments. We should do what Peter did not take time to do: allow hope to sink in and remember that there is more to the story than we see in any single moment.

We must always ... always ... listen to the end.

Amen.