

“When God is a Stranger”
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Mark 8:31-38
Sermon by Jan Edmiston
March 12, 2006 – 2nd Sunday in Lent

It’s the 2nd week of Lent and Dana Reeve died last Monday.

This bothered me all week. And I couldn’t get it out of my head as I was reading about Abraham and Peter. Let me explain.

Dana Reeve was the 44 year old widow of Christopher Reeve – the actor who played “*Superman*” – who died a year and a half ago after living the last nine years of his life paralyzed from the neck down. He had been in an equestrian accident near Charlottesville. When he finally, peacefully died it seemed fair and right that his young wife would be able to move on with *her life*, re-start her acting career, raise their son.

But then *she* was diagnosed with lung cancer last summer – a woman who had never smoked. It didn’t seem fair.

Nevertheless, the prognosis was good, treatments were said to be going well. Who *wouldn’t* have cancer after the stress she’d been through? She reportedly looked strong two months ago performing in New York. It looked like good would win out. She would beat this thing.

But on Monday, we learned she had died leaving a 13 year old son. It just doesn’t seem right.

This is just an everyday story – a trite story perhaps in the great scheme of things. But we human beings like for things to make sense.

It makes sense if you smoke a pack a day that you might get lung cancer. It makes sense that if you’ve kept your promises and worked hard that you’d be rewarded in life. Makes sense.

But what makes sense to *us* is not necessarily how life works and *this is where* we run head-first into a spiritual issue.

We forget that *God’s ways are not our ways. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.* (The prophet Isaiah said that.¹) Just when we think we’ve figured things out, *God surprises us* – sometimes to the point that God seems like a complete stranger.

¹ Isaiah 55:8

Peter had just given the winning answer in a discussion with Jesus and the other disciples when Jesus asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples dutifully told Jesus that some people thought he was John the Baptist. Others thought he was Elijah.

But when Jesus asked *them*, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter piped up and said, “You are the Messiah” or “You are the Christ.” Right answer.

“Messiah” or “Christ” was a term that meant “anointed one” and throughout Jewish history, several had been called “anointed.” But the Jews were long-waiting for **the One True Savior** who would come and bring fiery justice to Israel. They had been oppressed and humiliated for so long.

It was only fair that Someone would come with awesome power and **crush** the enemies of Israel once and for all time. In these days – the enemies were the Romans.

And crushing the enemies wasn’t merely *the idea of First Century Jews*. The great prophets long before had called for it: Joel and Zechariah and Daniel.² Christ was coming to rock things. And it wouldn’t be pretty. It would be absolutely terrifying.

So herein lies the problem: Jesus did not huddle in close with his disciples and give them a preview of the serious hurting he was going to give the Romans. Instead said this – and not in whispered tones. (He spoke “quite openly” we are told). This is how God would defeat the enemies of Israel:

The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the Jewish leaders, be killed and then after three days rise again.

What?!

Peter, who must have been feeling confident after his last contribution, pulled Jesus aside and said, “*That can’t be right.*” Actually we are told that Peter **rebuked** Jesus. He admonished the One he had just called “The Messiah”.

In Matthew’s version of this story, Peter received his name when he said: “You are the Messiah.”³ He had been known as “Simon, son of Jonah” but Jesus – at that point— re-named him **Peter** which means “Rock.”

Here Jesus gave Peter yet **another** new name: the name “Satan.”

Get behind me, Satan!

*For you are setting your mind not on **divine** things but on **human** things.*

Story of our lives. When something happens that doesn’t make sense, when God allows things to go a way that **we never** would have chosen for ourselves, when God feels

² See Joel 2-3, Zechariah 9-14, Daniel 7, Daniel 12.

³ Matthew 16:13-18.

like a stranger to us . . . maybe *we* are the strange ones. Maybe *we* are the ones who *just don't get it*.

If it doesn't make sense to *us*, if God's plans for us and God's expectations *of* us don't seem fair from our perspective – how foolish are we to believe that they must not make sense *eternally* from God's perspective? Friends, this is what faith is all about. This is why it's so *hard* to have faith.

Peter continued to say the wrong thing – *the faithless thing* – the rest of Jesus' life, the *most* faithless mistake being the night before Jesus died. Do you remember that night?

Peter – who had followed Jesus for three years – *denied ever knowing him*. Denied it three times. He's lucky he was only called "Satan" once.

Thousands of years before Peter received *his* new names, there were two others who would be re-named by God. Abram and Sarai had once lived comfortable lives in Haran (what is now southern Turkey). But God instructed Abram to leave his father's land and move on to a new land.

God promised to make Abram's name great – *not* so that life would be even *better* for Abram and his family but so that Abram "would be a blessing" to the rest of the world.⁴ And so Abram went.

He left everything he knew. He left his father's grave behind. And he went to Canaan, just like God told him.

But then something strange happened: there was a famine in Canaan. No food for Abram, his wife, his nephew, his huge assortment of cattle. They were going to have to move again – *this time* to Egypt where Abram would be "an alien," living in a land where his very life would be threatened.

This couldn't be right. Why would God call Abram to a faraway place only to starve or be threatened?

Abram was told that he would be the father of a multitude of nations. *But that couldn't be right*.

Abram was *old* and his *wife* was old. Abram and Sarai, realizing that this made no sense, make arrangements for Abram to have a child with one of Sarai's slaves.⁵ Maybe *that's* what God meant. Made sense to *them*!

⁴ See Genesis 12:2.

⁵ See Genesis 16 for the story of Hagar and Ishmael, Abram's firstborn.

But here in the passage we heard this morning, God clearly revealed that – if they would only trust God – Abram would indeed have a child with Sarai. And to seal the covenant, Abram would be re-named *Abraham*. And Sarai would forever be called *Sarah*. And Abraham was so trusting of God that he agreed to be circumcised and have all the men in their community be circumcised. And as for Sarah having a baby at her age, both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the thought of it because it just didn't make sense.

But in fact, a visiting stranger promised to return “in due season” and Sarah would have a son.⁶

Sometimes God is a stranger.

God allows things to happen and it doesn't make sense to us. Maybe we don't deserve it. Maybe we don't understand it. Maybe it makes us want to shut down or shake our fist or pull God aside and say, “*This can't be right.*”

But not only are we supposed to trust in God, we are supposed to deny ourselves and take up our *own* crosses and follow Jesus. Even when it doesn't make sense. Even when it doesn't seem quite fair.

These are hard words to hear. Lenten words.

Today we baptize another beautiful child, and I asked how they felt about baptizing their son during Lent. Some churches don't baptize anyone during Lent.

But we do, and **it seems especially appropriate on a day when Jesus reminds us that we can only save our lives by losing them.**

When we baptize this child today – or any child or adult – we are reminded that we are doing an outrageous thing: we are declaring that this person belongs to God and God can do what he will with that child. Like Abraham, he might be called to leave his father's home and travel to a dangerous place. Like the disciples, he might be called to drop his expected role in life and follow a path Jesus opens up.

It's all very scary and unknown. And all we have to do is read the Bible to know that **obeying God doesn't guarantee a life free of pain or sacrifice.** But God blesses us with glimpses of glory, glimpses of angels, small samples of what it tastes like to be free.

In closing I want to share some words by Dana Reeve that don't make much sense, except maybe from a divine perspective. She wrote these words about her marriage after her husband's accident:

⁶ Genesis 18:10.

*Something miraculous and wonderful happened amidst terrible tragedy, and a whole new dimension of life began to emerge. What we had yet to discover were all the gifts that come out of sharing hardship, the hidden pleasures behind the pain.*⁷

We wouldn't have blamed her if she'd become bitter and hardened. But instead, she went with it. *How could Superman be paralyzed? How could a young, healthy woman get lung cancer? How is it that the King of the Jews, the Son of Man, the Messiah should have to suffer and die?*

Jesus gives us a clue, but Peter completely missed it. *After three days he would rise again.* God has something planned that is beyond what we can see or imagine. This is the hope for those who follow Jesus, for those who obey God.

It's not easy. Sometimes it doesn't make sense. Sometimes we'll find that God feels like a stranger. But if we hang on, I believe we'll also soon find that there are divine things awaiting us.

Let us pray:

Holy and strange God, your ways are not our ways. And your thoughts are not our thoughts. But grant us such faith that something miraculous and wonderful might happen when we are most vulnerable and afraid. Help us to discover the gifts that come from sharing hardship with each other. And remind us that you are with us always, even to the close of the age. Amen.

⁷ Quote from *Care Packages: Letters to Christopher Reeve from Strangers and Other Friends*. See: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11709546>