

Psalm 22: 23-31
Mark 8: 31-38

“The Gap”

R.P.C.
March 1, 2015

Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

Ever since those days in seminary, I have heard the adage that the preacher is supposed to stand in the pulpit “with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” The implication of that statement is that in less than 20 minutes the preacher is to seek to bring these two entirely different worlds together. That means my job is to have the gospel - written some two thousand years ago - speak to our contemporary situation. I’ve been challenged to explore and explain that ancient word and context, and have it bring a word of hope and meaning to our present age.

Legend has it that the great German theologian, Karl Barth, was the one who started this saying about ‘the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.’ But I have never actually seen it in any of his writings. And even if the sainted Barth said it - with all due respect - the metaphor is lacking. The preacher laboring to bring together the archaic – and some would say “irrelevant” - world of the Bible with the new world of today is a problematic image, because there has been, and always will be this ... GAP – a gap between us and God.

When we think of this gap between us and God, we tend to characterize it as a problem of time. There has been 2,000 years since Jesus walked in Galilee, and more than 2,000 more years since Abraham left the land of Ur to enter Canaan. To be brought here on a Sunday morning is to be reminded of that historical gap between the ancient and the contemporary. But the gap has far greater implications than just the 2,000 year or even 4,000 year interval between us and God. The gap is there because we are unaccustomed to looking for the Living God, right here, presently among us.

Years ago, Reuel Howe interviewed laypeople and asked them what they thought about preaching. Howe’s most frequently heard layperson complaint was that sermons were too long on analysis of problems and too short on solutions. Apparently, people want sermons that, in 20 minutes or less provide solutions to life’s conflicts; they want sermons that answer our larger questions and bring resolution to our difficult issues.

The gospel IS the answer to our deepest questions; it IS the solution to our most pressing problems. Yet before it is an answer, it is first a question. Or is it better to say, that prior to the gospel’s answer is the provocation caused by **grappling with the question? If God is present in this Jew from Nazareth, then**

who are we in relation to him? How then should we live? What do his words, and ministry and call have to do with what is going on in this, our world?

Too often popular American evangelism presents the gospel as “the solution” to all of our problems. Too often we package the Gospel as the resolution to all our conflicts. We market the Good News as a technique for making not-so-nice people nicer and not-so-successful people more successful: “My life was a mess... I was on drugs.... I was addicted to ... to whatever... But then I found Jesus and everything got fixed.” That statement has been true in numerous instances, I’m sure; but realistically, we all know that there still remains this gap: the gap between temptation and renunciation, as was mentioned last week; that continual gap between obedience and disobedience; the gap of that “mystery” that exists between us and God.

Of course we keep finding ways to attempt to cut the great, Almighty God down to our size as we pretend we can span that gap. Jim Taylor, writing in *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, humorously asks himself the question, “Is technology a blessing or a curse?”

He writes: “I started wondering what might happen if God got with modern technology and installed a voice-mail (system). I imagined something like this: ‘Hello,’ says an angelic voice. ‘Thank you for calling heaven. We value your prayer and will make every effort to take care of your concerns promptly and efficiently. Please stay on the line: we can deal with your prayers more quickly than if you hang up and try again.’ ‘To help us direct your call to the party to whom you wish to speak please route your call as follows: If you wish to speak to one of the martyrs, press 1; to one of the saints, press 2; to one of the angels, press 3; to the Virgin Mary, press 4; to Jesus, press 5; to the Holy Spirit, press 6; and if you wish to speak directly to God, press seven.”

“I pressed seven. I wanted to go right to the top. Beep and beep again. There was a long pause. The telephone line played a recording of Bruce Springsteen singing a Bach cantata accompanied by a choir comprising 2,000 clones of Linda Ronstadt. Then a voice came on that was neither male nor female, neither loud nor soft. In fact, I couldn’t even give it a quality – it seemed to vibrate through the very molecules of nature and to permeate my cells and my thoughts. I knew at last, it must be God.

‘Thank you for calling,’ the voice said. ‘Your call is very important to me. I’m sorry, but I’m either away from my heavenly throne or tied up with another prayer request. ‘If you wish to speak to my secretary, press 0. “Otherwise , please

leave a detailed message at the sound of the HARP, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

One of the constant temptations of preachers is we too are constantly trying to "bridge that gap." We are tempted to try to . . . domesticate the gospel. It is probably a form of misguided evangelism. But we want to make the gospel easier so it will be more palatable – easier to swallow and go down. We are tempted to present a gospel that is honey rather than the salt and vinegar that it often can be. In short, we preachers are tempted to shorten, or if we could, eliminate "the gap."

We have been hearing for some time now that the poor old church is out of date, out of touch, and in need of becoming more "user-friendly." We need to get the gospel down to a slogan for a bumper sticker or something that fits on a flashy, multicolored electronic church sign. Maybe we could reduce the Ten Commandments down to seven, call them "The Seven Suggestions" and encourage folks obey only the easiest three of their choice. All of that would certainly help to "bridge the gap."

But then there are all those moments in scripture when Jesus seems to be uninterested in getting us closer to God by cutting corners. Rather, he seems to increase the distance but making more demands. There is that distance between who we think he is and who he really is. And his "narrow way" often seems to widen the gap between us and God, rather than bridging that gap. So what do we do with that?

Like in today's scripture lesson, for example... By now in Mark's gospel, Jesus' disciples have been with him for some time. They probably think they have gotten to know him pretty well. "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... and be killed...." The shock of that idea is almost more than they can take. After all, is this any way for a Messiah to act?

Peter took Jesus aside and urged him to stop talking like this. Such talk will cause people to begin having negative thoughts; they might get depressed. How can you expect us disciples to attract people to your movement, Peter might have asked, if you go around talking like this?

Jesus REBUKES Peter with, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow me." "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it" (vv. 34-35). And thus the gap widens even further for the disciples ... and for us.

It was all so very strange. No doubt there were those following Jesus that day because they thought that by following him they would save their lives, make their lives better and more fulfilling. So these must have been tough words to hear from Jesus. And though Mark doesn't say this, after this conflicted teaching, we can well imagine that the crowds got a little smaller. After all, the gap between who the people expected Jesus to be, and who Jesus was proving himself to be, was getting larger. We might expect that Jesus' followers are finding it difficult to hear about the suffering of Christ. After all, if Christ is the Lord – if Christ is indeed the Son of God, then surely Christ should be all powerful and untouched by pain and suffering.

This gap is surely behind Peter's rebuke of Jesus. The Greek verb used here for "rebuke" is significant. It occurs twice in this passage – first to state what Peter does to Jesus; then to describe what Jesus does to Peter. The word "rebuke" occurs elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark in reference to what Jesus does to the demons he reproaches in an exorcism – a demon who openly identify him as the Son of God. Thus the word "rebuke" is a strong word in Mark's vocabulary, a word of condemnation; a word whose purpose is to highlight radical change.

Only a few lines prior, Peter is the one who confesses that Jesus is the Christ. Apparently, Peter had a definition of the Messiah that was different from Jesus' understanding. And when Peter says that Jesus is wrong to talk about a suffering Messiah, Jesus retorts with "Get behind me, Satan. For you are not thinking about the things of God, but the things of humans."

These are strange but significant words that are loaded with meaning. Jesus is there as the Suffering One who moves toward the cross. And Peter's exalted view of Jesus identity is nothing short of satanic. And in all honesty, often like Peter, we must confess to that great gap between who we think Jesus ought to be and who Jesus really is.

Encounters with the scriptures like the one we have for today, remind us that we do not own God. Scripture keeps Jesus available to us, yet also keeps Jesus some distance from us in order that the spaces between us and the throne of God might be kept free, untamed, awe-inspiring and interesting. Here we are, this second Sunday of Lent, gathered here in order to get closer to Jesus. But then in the scripture we sense a gap – a growing gap between what we think Jesus ought to be and do and what he calls upon us to be and do. Perhaps we have come seeking to get our lives fixed, to make our lives easier. But here Jesus speaks of losing our lives, of taking up our crosses and following him. With somber warning,

Jesus indicates that things could get tough for us if we truly want to walk with him down his narrow path.

In such moments, on Sundays like this one, we realize that Jesus, though he is God with us, is still at some distance from us. We cannot tame him, domesticate him, or make him over into our own image. He resists us, patiently yet firmly. He is determined to have us on his terms, rather to acquiesce into our terms.

Sometimes we gather and he blesses us; sometimes he rebukes us, like Peter. And if we don't want to be corrected and challenged, then we are missing a significant part of his call to us. On the other hand, if we are up to the risk – if we want some adventure in our faith – if we are willing to meet a God whom we had not necessarily expected to meet – then come along for the journey.

In a few short weeks, our 40-day Lenten journey with Jesus will be over. We shall see again where his path finally leads. The cost of his faithfulness to us will be painfully apparent for all to see as he is lifted on a cross – as HE bridges the gap between us and God - for our sakes. Dare we follow him – even at a distance? May our prayer today be that God would give us all, the grace to follow.... Amen.