

Sermon 2010 Lent Midweek 3

Text: 1 Peter 1:3-5

Theme: "This is it???"

The time was coming when everyone would be reminded why he was the king! He was timeless, his followers were from all generations. This would be his greatest moment. The dancers were getting ready, the venue was set, tickets were sold, and the dates were confirmed. This would be it! The finale. A capstone to remind everyone why he was the king of pop. But it didn't happen that way did it?

Just like so many other middle aged people, Michael Jackson found out that life has a funny way of twisting and turning out of our control and life caught up to him. Apparently even the king of pop is not immune to death. I can imagine that instead of "This Is It!" running through his mind at his death, perhaps he considered "this is it?"

Like I have said before, no matter who you think you are and no matter what you have accomplished, in the end they dig a hole, drop you in, throw dirt in your face and go home to eat slices of ham and potato salad. So if we all know how it ends,

and we do, maybe we can focus on the story that leads up to the end.

If you were to wrap your life up in one story, just one story, what would it be? What would be the one big story that makes sense of all the other little stories in your life? Our lives are filled with countless little stories. We work, we parent, we succeed, we fail, we build our lives brick by brick – or, as Jacob Marley said in “A Christmas Carol,” we forge them link by link. Some of us go big and some of us are happy with a more ordinary life, but we all look for the things that give life meaning. We want our lives to be imperishable, undefiled, and unfading for all time. No one wants to finish his journey and look back and say “That was it?”

Two thieves were crucified with Jesus. Each thief had his own story, just as each of us has our own stories and yet our individual stories overlap. That was certainly true of the thieves. The overlap in their stories was their lives of crime, their condemnation, and, of course, their gruesome execution. But in the end, each thief was defined in a dramatically different way.

Luke 22:

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Christ?’ Save yourself and us!’” That thief’s defining story is cynicism, death, and eternal death. But the other thief’s story reads this way:

“The other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’”

What’s this thief’s story? Confession of sin, forgiveness from Jesus, and paradise. This is it, not with a question mark but with an exclamation point. This is it!

This is the big story that brings all our little stories together. This is the defining story that helps us not only understand who we are and where we’re going, but accept that and even learn to rejoice in it instead of always trying to be someone who we are not, going places we have no business being.

St. Peter had this story in mind when he wrote to Christians scattered in Asia Minor; modern day Turkey. In his first letter to these Christians, Peter writes,

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Their lives were defined by that incredible story. So is ours. You and I have a resurrected Savior who gives us paradise.

A famous theologian wrote the following:

“Among earnest Christians in the Church today there is a growing desire to meet together with other Christians in the rest periods of their work for common life under the Word.

Communal life is again being recognized by Christians today as the grace that it is, as the extraordinary, the ‘roses and lilies’ of the Christian life. Christianity means community through Jesus

Christ and in Jesus Christ” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* [New York: HarperOne, 1978], 21).

Today we see students in high school gathering for Bible Study at school and packing our youth lounge on Wednesday nights. We see prayer meetings being held in factories and noon time downtown church services filling up as Christians realize that they want to wrap their lives in a story that is more important than the stock market or a political ideal. Interestingly enough, that famous theologian who wrote what I quoted a minute ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer and he wrote in the 1930’s of the German people under the Nazi regime. Apparently when we Christians are oppressed, we begin to value the best things in life.

Like Germany, The U.S. was once an overtly Christian nation. Going to church was a social norm. Most people, whether they were churchgoers or not, knew their Bible stories. Every school day and sporting event began with prayer. Today all kinds of stories are being told in America. Our situation is very similar to the situation of the Christians to whom Bonhoeffer wrote and

to whom St. Peter wrote. They were not people of privilege. They were not the “party in power.”

Amid all the stories swirling in our fractured and fragmented society, Peter encourages us to remember the story that defines us. Our jobs do not define us. Our particular roles do not define us. We are so much more than that. Our story is about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our story is about living here, but knowing that we will receive “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you.” You are wrapped in this story and this story defines all other stories in your life. Amen.