

February 25, 2018: Second Sunday of Lent (Year B)
Mark 8:27-38: Intervention

Some time ago a close friend and his family found themselves in a difficult situation many of you are familiar with, how to approach an elderly family member about handing over their car keys, for good. In his case it was his grandfather. He was nearly ninety-years old. His vision was not so good. His reaction time had lengthened considerably. And his overall health was such that passing out, or worse, while driving, seemed like a very good possibility.

As the situation worsened they began to fear their only option was to stage an intervention. The family would need to gather together in his home, sit him down, share their concerns with him, and and tell him in a loving, but straightforward way, that his driving days were over, and insist he turn over his keys immediately. Before they could get around to doing it, the very thing they feared would happen, happened. My friend's grandfather was on his way home when a mailbox darted right out in front of him. His car, a 1980 Ford LTD Crown Victoria, sustained only minor damages, but the mailbox was totaled. Thankfully there was only junk mail inside. It could have been much worse. Minus the cost of a new mailbox, in the end, it was all for the best. After the incident, my friend's grandfather gave up the keys voluntarily.

Have you ever had to stage an intervention, or thought you might need to? A good friend or a family member was engaging in some type of destructive behavior, driving when they shouldn't be, like my friend's grandfather, or struggling with an addiction to alcohol, or prescription pain killers or some other type of drug, or an addiction to pornography, or gambling, or maybe in the midst of a very unhealthy relationship, or harming themselves in some way. I'm sure we could come up with other examples. You have argued, begged, and pleaded with them, but nothing seems to be working. You have come to the realization that they are simply not going to stop this behavior on their own, so staging an intervention, seems like your only option.

One way to understand what's going on in our text for today is to think of it as an intervention, only the destructive behavior is spiritual in nature.

We talked about this passage a couple weeks ago. It describes the conversation Jesus had with his disciples immediately prior to the Transfiguration. He was discussing his identity with them. First he asked them what other people were saying about him. They shared some of the more popular perspectives. Then he asked them what they thought about him. Peter, speaking for the group, said "You are the Messiah." And Jesus told them not to share this information with anyone. It doesn't take long to understand why.

Jesus began to explain to them how he would fulfill his role as the Messiah, and it wasn't what they were expected. He talked about his great suffering, his rejection by the religious leaders, his death, and finally, his resurrection. Peter pulled Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, telling him that this was not the way things were going to go down. This word rebuke literally refers to the practice of a rabbi rapping the knuckles of a student who was not on task, or had the wrong answer, or something like that. Of course, Peter was not the rabbi in this relationship, he was the student. It would be like a child going up and giving one of their parents a spanking.

Jesus responded to Peter's rebuke with one of his own. So far in Mark's Gospel we have seen Jesus rebuking demons, now he is rebuking his own disciple. Not because Peter was a demon, but he was thinking like one, so much so that Jesus called him Satan. Peter was so convinced that his perspective

on the Messiah was the right one, Jesus decided he needed an intervention. Like any intervention, it was very public, it was humiliating, it was embarrassing, it was eye-opening. But it was the only way Peter would begin to realize the problem with his way of thinking. And after Jesus' death and resurrection, the transformation would begin to happen.

What was the truth that Peter was having such a hard time understanding? That following Jesus was about self-denial. It was about sacrifice. It was about putting others before yourself. It was about being willing to lose your life in the interest of saving your soul. That truly living started with dying.

Peter struggled with this for the same reasons we do. It goes against what the world, and even some within the church, are telling us. The prevailing message out there is that our goals in life should be self-fulfillment, self-actualization, reaching our potential, and satisfying our wants and desires. Even if we could tune it out, we would still have to overcome our sinful human nature, which is where that message originated. On our own, it cannot be done. We are powerless to follow Jesus, and embrace life as he defines it. We just can't do it. Like Peter, we all need an intervention.

The intervention we all needed, collectively, came in the form of a cross. Through Jesus' death our sins were forgiven, and a relationship with God became a possibility. Without that intervention, every single one of us would be lost. But then as individuals, we all stand in need of several interventions along our journey toward Christ-likeness. Several moments when we just to hear the brutally honest truth about who we are, and begin the process of becoming who God wants us to be, or to borrow the title of our theme, to begin the process of rehabilitation, to embrace a "new normal."

So sometimes God stages an intervention in our lives. He gives us a wake up call. Being in the wilderness plays a role in this, because in the wilderness, we have no choice but to listen. This is what we need, because if we had a choice, we would choose to reject what God was telling us. Because the truth hurts. It's not fun. But one day we will see every intervention as proof that God loves us.

There are a few points I want to make in reference to this theme of intervention.

The first one is this. God often uses other people to stage a spiritual intervention in our lives. It is our natural tendency to have a blind spot when it comes to our own faults and failures. We just don't always see the ways in which we fall short of living the life God wants for us. We may be open to the idea of God speaking to us directly, making us aware of these things. Which is a possibility. But we also need to be open to the possibility that God could choose to speak to us through another human being. If someone comes to us on his behalf and points out an area in our lives where work needs to be done, we should at least listen to what they have to say, before we dismiss it outright.

Related to this...God may want to use you to stage a spiritual intervention in the life of someone else. This can be really hard. Just as it's not fun to be on the receiving end of an intervention, it's not fun to be facilitating one. If we see a fellow believer doing something we know is not Christ-like, or engaging in some destructive behavior, we need to be willing to call them out on it, if we feel led to do so. That's a big "if." It is so important that we examine our motives before doing something like this. It can't be because we think we are better than them, but because we want to be obedient, and because we love them. It could hurt our relationship with that person. They may get mad and refuse to speak to us...but that is risk we must take because it could further someone along in their journey toward salvation.

Also, there may be situations God is not directly responsible for, consequences of decisions we have made, or decisions others have made, or something for which there is not obvious cause we are aware

of...these can themselves serve as interventions. They reveal an uncomfortable truth about us. Even if God had nothing to do with it, other than simply allowing it to happen, he can still use those times to make necessary changes.

I've told you this story before...through life circumstances my Grandfather was put in the position to become my Grandmother's care-giver. She was diagnosed with dementia, and near the very end of her life, developed cancer. I don't believe God caused either of those things to happen to my grandparents. But I do believe that God taught my grandfather an important lesson about servant-hood through that experience. In part, because he was willing to listen. He was willing to allow God to redeem that terrible situation and use it for good. This is what God does.

I see people going through so many difficult things and even if they don't ask, I know they want to know where is God in all this. In some situations, it is easy to determine who is responsible. In others, it's nearly impossible. And I cannot tell them with absolute certainty the role God played, but I can say that God can make something beautiful out of any situation we will allow him to do so. He can redeem every evil in your life and use it for his glory and your good.

One last thought before we move on to the lighting of our Lenten Candle...

Remember that all this...the wilderness, the intervention, and everything else that makes the rehabilitation experience so difficult...it's all leading toward the resurrection. And God is walking beside us each step of the way.

Lighting the Lenten Candle

Reader: As we move through this season of Lent we acknowledge that we are wilderness. We have lost our way. We cannot fix ourselves. We need God's intervention in our lives.

Reader: We light this candle, remembering that God has intervened in our world by sending His Son Jesus to die on a cross, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. And that God continues to intervene in our lives, shaping, molding, and transforming us into the image of His Son.

(light the second candle)

Prayer: As we continue through this Lenten season, dear God, remind us that your intervention is always for our good. In the midst of the humiliation, embarrassment, and sadness that intervention may bring, remind us that your intervention makes us fit for heaven.