

“Life is Risky”

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12, Matthew 7:13-14;
John 10:9-15

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We are in the church season we call Lent, and in the last few weeks we have been doing what I would consider some Lenten work. Oftentimes we think about Lent as a time of introspection. I'm inviting us to do a bit different kind of introspection than we generally do in Lent. It's thinking about the nature of our lives in terms of the world we live in as well, not just internally but together.

The first Sunday of Lent we talked about the uncertainty we face in the world, how that is something we can sometimes struggle with, and how we need our faith in the face of that uncertainty. Last week we talked a little bit about boundedness and how in spite of all the uncertainty there's a way that life is also bounded. We may struggle with being bounded, wondering why there are particular boundaries or where the boundaries are. Again, faith helps us both recognize and consider the boundaries we might identify and need.

As we have been thinking about the world we live in, with the uncertainty and the boundedness, there is another aspect of that I would like to think about today: what is life like? One way of talking about life is saying life is risky business. The very nature of life has some risk to it. The only problem I have with using the word “risk” is sometimes we do things that are risky today simply for the adrenaline it brings about. Theme parks are all about that. But when we begin to think about the risky nature of life, I'm not thinking about things that are just there for the adrenaline. I'm thinking about the real dangers of life, the real struggles of life. Normally it's not something I really like to talk about a lot. It's not a place I really want to go. Perhaps that's why I don't read Ecclesiastes very often. But if we read the simple scripture from Ecclesiastes today, it suggests we're all going to face calamities. There is a certain unexpected nature to life, and some of those are pitfalls. We all want life to be a bowl of cherries, but Erma Bombeck reminds us there are the pits we have to watch out for.

As we read the Psalms, over and over again we hear the people recognizing the pits of life and asking God to help them go in a different direction, to re-enter and find the sweetness again. But it's hard because we recognize, as we go through life, that we can't completely distance ourselves from all hardship. I wish it were all pleasant. As much as I wish sometimes there were never grief, I've certainly experienced it. As much as I wish there was never illness, as much as I wish there were none of those things that I wish there weren't, those things exist. I don't understand exactly why that is, but what I do recognize is the Bible doesn't shy away from saying that life is sometimes hard, that we run into the hardships of life.

Not only are there the things we run into or experience, that kind of come into our lives, there's also the sense of hardship in the things that we need to do to make life work. Going to school doesn't always seem like joy. Sometimes there's hardship involved. It's hard to do something I need to do to get to the point where I know I need to go. There are all kinds of things like that in life. In my work life, there are things I have to

get done if I'm going to get to the next step. Sometimes it feels like a hardship. In relationships there are sometimes things we need to work through together to get to the next level. I think you understand. Most of us would say somehow in life we have experienced a little bit of that. So what do we do with that? We know it's real.

I always ask why. I'm not sure it's a question I can completely answer. But I do recognize if there were no risk, what would a decision mean? If there were no sense that it would make a difference, what difference does a decision make? So that's one way of seeing risk. Also it feels like, in a way, God is inviting us on an adventure, and it's no adventure if there are no ups and downs involved. If it's all the same there's no adventure to it. I still don't think those ways of seeing risk quite cover it all, but I do feel like there's a sense of God inviting us into life and that we will have to work through the hard spots.

Isn't that what Jesus says? The gate is narrow, but the path to destruction is broad and easy. What it makes me think about is how easy it is to just go with the flow, how easy it is to just go along with the trends around me, whatever the present current of life is around me, to just let it go without much thought. It feels to me that in faith we are invited not to just let the current of life take us along, but to look where it might be taking us, to examine it.

Last week I used the metaphor of a landscape. It's not simply to hike along and not worry about whether we're going up or down, whether we're going across from one watershed to another. I think Jesus is inviting us to notice, to see where we're at, to assess the landscape, and to listen to him about what landscape he might be inviting us to be in. I think it's an invitation for us to think about who we are, to pay attention to what God might be doing in our lives and speaking into our lives.

The struggle with all that is I'm not sure I can do it on my own. I need something to lean on. I need some help. Maybe at times when we are trying to find our way, it might be helpful to have something that can go ahead of us so that if we do go over a hill, we don't go over the precipice as well. However, when I began to think about Jesus as the one who guides us, who we can lean on, there's also a temptation then to ask Jesus to be a club or a cudgel. But Jesus rarely says anything that suggests that I should use Jesus this way, but more the idea of a divining rod. It's amazing to me that people searching for water to drill a well still use a divining rod as one of the best ways to find that water. I guess describing Jesus as a divining rod is a little strange, but there is a sense in recognizing that not only is Jesus one we can lean on, but he leads us and helps us feel our way forward, guides us.

In fact, he suggests that not only is he one we can lean on, he is the one who takes us through the gate. It's hard to find a narrow gate. It's hard to find our way. But when he says "I am the gate," he's giving us a clue, inviting us to come in and through him to God and in and through him to life. If we just look at that last imagery of him as gate and Good Shepherd, we begin to think about what it means to have one who leads us through the difficulties of life.

There are moments where we need to be in the fold. I think that's one of the things about being in church and worshipping together. It's a time to be in the fold. That's one reason why, when we do have struggles in the church, it feels so hard, because we know we have been invited into the fold of Christ to together encourage and know the wonder of that grace that is the thing that gives us peace of mind and wonder at the world and the life God has given us.

However, I don't think the sense is that Jesus keeps those sheep in the fold all the time, but then brings them into life. There is a going out, and experiencing of life. The pits are there. They have to be avoided sometimes. There are certain valleys that are better than others. But the invitation is to let him lead us.

There's the advice that we should be careful about who we listen to – the hired man. I always have to laugh a little about this because in a way, I am the hired man. What Jesus suggests is the hired shepherd is there for his own benefit. You have to be careful about that. What I recognize is that in a way my own work is not the same as Christ's. My hope is that I can help prompt us and guide us and encourage us into conversation, into a certain direction, into looking toward him, but if it were ever all about me it would be wrong. So, throughout our lives we have to be careful about the ones who are doing it simply for themselves, saying it is for our benefit when it is for their benefit. I think we notice that. We watch for the wolf at the door and wonder where we need to go. That's why the fold is so important. It's a place where we can be safe and cared for, remembering who brings us together.

So there's going to be some hard work along the way. We're going to encounter some hard things. We already have, together. But as we walk with Christ, lean on him, allow him to lead us, I believe the promise that where Christ leads us is to life, and to abundant life. Sometimes that abundant life is even in the midst of the very struggles of life. It's not really easy for me to think about the riskiness, the dangers, the calamities, the hardships of life, nor do I think that they are things that we look for with relish or want to go through, yet we know that we need to walk through them and find the path and remember that Christ is our guide. We can lean on him and allow him to show us the way. There is a peace of mind that comes with him beside and ahead of us, even entering into our lives in the midst of some of the struggles of life. May we all know the wonder of our Good Shepherd.

Let's pray:

Lord, we recognize that sometimes life seems like risky business. There are dangers that we have to look out for. We ask that you help us have open eyes. Open our ears to the voice of Christ that we might hear him leading us. Let us accept the way he invites us into the fold, to guide us. May we know the still waters and the lush meadows of faith. Perhaps, Lord, in the midst of the struggles in our lives we will recognize you with us. Lord, help us hold on to you and recognize your grace as it comes as a narrow gate, a narrow path, but a path that leads to life, and life abundant. Lead on, Lord. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.