



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 26, 2013

"Sorting Through the Rocks" (Gospel of Luke Series)

The Rev. Dr. Drew Hulse

Luke 22:31-40 - ³¹ "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." ³³ And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" ³⁴ Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me."

Whether you were aware of it or not, this season the Miami Heat of the National Basketball Association recorded the tenth best record in the history of the league. They posted a record of 66 wins and 16 losses. At one point during the season, they won 27 games in a row. Needless to say, they pretty much breezed through the season and the first round of the playoffs.

In the second round of the playoffs, the Heat came upon the Chicago Bulls, a team that had given them some problems during the season, but Chicago now was without their star Derrick Rose and two other key players. The first game should have been a fairly easy game for the Heat, being fully rested and injury-free for the most part.

But that night, on May 6th, the Bulls defeated the Heat 93-86. The Heat was stunned and had been given what sports likes to call a

"wake-up call." Had they grown complacent? Were they too well rested and now rusty? Did they just overlook the Bulls? Would they respond?

Two days later the Heat would face the Bulls in game 2 of the playoffs. They would proceed to destroy the Bulls. The final score ended up 115-78 making it the worst loss in Bulls playoff history and the biggest win in Heat playoff history. The Heat had responded to the wake-up call and went on to beat the Bulls 4-1 in the series and move on to the Conference Finals.

Interestingly, the Heat got another wake-up call on Friday against the Indiana Pacers. It will be interesting to see if they once again respond.

Now, I know that is more than enough basketball for most of you...while others are saying church has finally gotten interesting! The point here is the idea of a wake-up call.

A wake-up call is *"an event that warns someone that they need to deal with an urgent or dangerous problem."*

Okay, so maybe basketball isn't an urgent or dangerous problem, unless you're the coach. Maybe a better example is the I-5 bridge across the Skagit River, one I've driven over many, many times

with vans full of rowdy and excited junior high students. That might be considered a wake-up call for bridge safety in the Northwest.

Chances are many of us have gotten these wake up calls in one way or another. Maybe it was a medical check-up and a test with results that alerted us to a potential problem. For some it might have been a near-miss auto accident, a shake-up at work, a downturn in the economy. You had been taking things for granted, you were potentially beginning to get complacent, and then you get smacked in the face. The question is, "What are you going to do with that wake-up call?"

Let's go back to today's passage. As we have been working through the Gospel of Luke, we have been coming to the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry. We have seen Jesus and the disciples walk through the final days, and now they have found themselves in the upper room.

It is interesting to think that life has been fairly easy for the disciples. Yes, they have left their nets and homes behind to follow Jesus, but for the most part, they have been able to stay in the background. It is Jesus who has been the object of the Pharisees' wrath. It is Jesus who has been ridiculed and mocked.

Life has been so easy for the disciples that in the previous verses in Luke 22, right after Jesus tells of His death as part of the Last Supper, the disciples begin to argue about which one of them was going to be the greatest. It is now that they are going to receive their wake-up call.

Jesus looks at the disciples and gives them what could only be described as a wake-up call.

Luke 22:31-32 - ³¹ "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Even though Jesus says "Simon, Simon" the statement made by Jesus is to all of them. The "you" in Greek is plural. If it was the South, Jesus would have said "y'all."

Jesus tells them to their faces, "Fasten your seatbelts, folks, things are going to get tough."

There are several things we need to learn from this passage.

1. The struggle we are in is a spiritual struggle.

In Ephesians 6, verses 11-12, Paul reminds us of this truth. ¹¹ "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Jesus clearly understood this struggle. From the beginning Jesus knew that His ultimate adversary

was Satan. The battle, which for our eyes began in the wilderness and continued over and over in the casting out of demons, was a daily reality for Jesus. Now, the object of Satan's efforts was going to be the followers of Jesus rather than Jesus Himself. The followers of Jesus, who up until now had it fairly easy, were now going to be the object of Satan's efforts to thwart the plans of God. It was going to be a battle. Jesus says:

2. Satan is going to sift all of us like wheat.

The metaphor of being sifted was taken from everyday life for the disciples. The farmers would harvest the wheat, and as they did, everything would be picked up together. It was all placed in the sieve. Along with the grains of wheat there would be the chaff, sticks, rocks, and debris.

"In Biblical times a sieve was a type of winnowing tool usually with a coarse mesh, possibly made of reed or string, In the sifting process the grain would fall to the ground and the stones, chaff and other unwanted substance would remain in the sieve." The farmer would shake the sieve to have the grain fall through and be collected and have the rubbish remain in the sieve and then be thrown out.

Jesus wanted the disciples to know that difficult days were coming with trials and questions. It was going to get hard and some of them were going to fall away. They were going to struggle. But the good news was this:

3. Jesus has prayed for us, that we make it through.

Verse 32 said "but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail" and John 17:15 says, "I am not asking you to take them

out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

Jesus has prayed for us, He knows what we are going to be facing, and He prays that our faith would not fail. Jesus uses a very interesting word here. The verb "fail" (Greek *ekleipo*) is interesting. It's where we would get the word "eclipse" from it.

Jesus is not protecting us from falling. What He prays for is that our faith will not cease, die out. And with an understanding of grace, He prays that when we return, we will be so strong that we will now strengthen the brethren.

This is an important thing for us to know. Satan's lie to us is that once we've fallen, our faith has failed, and we no longer have value in God's eyes. We think we have become the trash that needs to be thrown out. We think we can never again be used by God, so our tendency is to separate ourselves even further from God and the people He's put in our lives. If we do that, then Satan has won.

We need to hear this truth. The grain of wheat is wheat. Hear that again, the grain of wheat is already wheat. It doesn't become wheat by going through the sifting. It has already been made wheat.

You are a child of God, if you have accepted Christ as Lord. Nothing we go through, even when we do it to ourselves, can change the reality that those who have put their trust in Christ as Lord are children of God.

The word for "return" carries the idea of being lost, then turning around and retracing your steps until you find your way back. It is to be restored to where you were, but now even stronger.

And when we have returned what is going to be different with this restoration? All of the rocks, the rubbish, the unnecessary and useless trash we have been mixed up with will have been separated from our lives and thrown away—and what will be left is the grain, the pure wheat ready to be used.

You see, what Satan meant for harm, his sifting of our lives, putting us through trials and tribulations, God can and will use for good.

Remember the story of Joseph and his brothers? They sold him into slavery, but as a result Joseph ended up in Pharaoh's court and was used to bring about the salvation of his family. Joseph says to his brothers:

“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.” Genesis 50:20

As we make ourselves available to God, He will bring about His good result within us. Satan wanted to sift the disciples so that no wheat would remain. God allows us to be sifted so that no chaff remains.

I've got an idea: Why not be proactive? Why not get rid of some of the rocks *before* you go through the sifting? I love the passage in Hebrews 12:1-2:

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set

before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus wants us to run unencumbered the race He has set before us, but the problem is we have a tendency to enjoy rock collecting. We thought some of those rocks would be helpful and maybe were once attracted to—even though we knew we probably shouldn't have taken them.

Let's look at it like this. I've asked Madison Kwok to come up and demonstrate running the race. Madison represents all of us as we seek to follow Jesus. Madison is getting prepared to run the race, but along the way she potentially has added some things to her backpack she thought would be helpful. Each one of these five-pound weights represents one of these items. As I put them into Madison's backpack, they represent the weight of trying to carry that item while trying to follow Jesus.

- Money
- Popularity
- Success
- Relationships
- Entertainment
- Occasional drinking (“got it under control”)
- Anger (“justified”)
- Guilt
- Mortgage
- New car
- Shame
- Corporate ladder
- Distractions

Each one of these items, which might be neutral in and of itself, can become a distraction. They can weigh us down and keep us from running the race of faithfulness. As I take the pack off of Madison's back, you can see the relief of letting go of the rocks in our lives that can encumber us.

We knew some of the things we put into our lives weren't the best, but many of the things seemed like a good idea at the time. Now we realize that if they become the focus of our lives, they can keep us from running the race Jesus calls us to.

It's like the kid who wants a car so he can come to church, but he has to get a job to pay for the car. Now he can't come to church because he has to work to pay for the car, which he bought so he could come to church! (Maybe it should've been a bus pass). The author of Hebrews tells us to lay aside the things that weight us down.

I know it's hard to tell right now, but in high school I ran cross-country in the central valley of California. It was usually very hot, and like most cross-country runners, you would run with just your silks. One day, before a ten-mile run, the weather was cold so I decided to wear a jersey sweatshirt and sweat pants. They felt great as I began to run and it seemed like a great decision. The problem was, at about four miles out it began to rain. And rain it did.

Soon the sweat suit I had on to keep warm now weighed over 25 pounds soaked with rain, and I still had six miles to go. What had seemed like a good idea was now entangling me and keeping me from running. If only I could have laid them down.

When we lay aside those things that entangle us, we can run the race of faithfulness with endurance, encouraging others to run with us. That's what Jesus prays Peter will do when He returns—that he will strengthen or encourage the other followers. Isn't that amazing?

Jesus knew Peter would fall, but He told Peter He has already prayed for him that when he came back to the faith Peter would be an encourager of all. Don't let that one pass without taking it in. How amazing is it that Jesus, the Son of God, has prayed for us? We see that prayer in John 17:20.

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word..."

We are part of the focus of Jesus' prayer. We are not alone. No matter what we are going through, no matter how challenging the sifting might seem, Jesus has prayed for us.

What about you? Have you been feeling like recently you've been being tossed around? Have you been going through it and been wondering where God has been in the process?

Maybe what God wants to do is remove some of the rocks from our lives, the things that have been entangling us and cluttering up the pure grain.

I want to challenge you this day to allow God to have His good result within you. Trust the process. Remember, Jesus has already prayed for us. He is with us in the process. He is going to make us stronger than ever.

We all know the story of Peter's denial. Pastor Tim will preach on it this coming Sunday. What I want us to see is the good result God had in Peter's life as he encourages the church as it goes through persecution.

Let's end with the words of Peter after he had experienced this amazing truth in his life, just as Jesus predicted.

⁷ "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen."
1 Peter 5:7-11

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Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. You may request the free audio version at: fpchkoolau@gmail.com