

## “Intervention”

*Rehab series.<sup>1</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent*

Mark 8:27-38

At the end of my street is a sign which I find amusing. It says, “Road Ends,” with a red diamond below the words to emphasize this simple fact. I chuckle when I see it because: 1) there is a fence at the end of the road, and 2) there is a big lake behind the sign. Seriously, who drives up to this sign thinking, “I wonder if the road is just flooded...oh, wait, the road ends. Of course.” Is the sign supposed to stop an out of control car from taking a dip? I don’t know. I’ve never seen a car in the lake, so maybe it does work.

There are times in life when it is obvious we shouldn’t go in a particular direction. Any yet, sometimes we do anyway. We should stop eating unhealthy food – but we take one more bite. We should stop arguing with people – but we have to have the last word. We should put down that remote control, turn the screen off – but we take one more look. Before we know it, we can be trapped in a situation that is beyond our control, and it is a lot like driving into the lake without ever planning on it. When that happens, we need intervention.

Last week we discussed how the season of Lent is like Spring Training for Christians. The forty days before Easter are our spiritual rehab. I mentioned the difficulties of rehab – the pain, the struggle against our habits and human nature. Rehab is like entering the wilderness, but at least we had the choice to go there. Today is different. Intervention is when someone else takes us into the wilderness, forcing us to change our direction.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series>

I am a firm believer that when we are not following God’s way, we need intervention. God places signs in our lives, but we ignore them. Instead we live in a culture where the dominant religion is therapeutic deism. The commandments are: God exists, but he doesn’t really want anything to do with you; if it feels right, go ahead and do it; and just try to make everyone happy, especially yourself. In essence, we become our own gods, handing out blessing to those who agree with us and punishing those who do not. The result of following our own ways is the same result as when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit: we die. Sometimes literally and instantly. Other times, it is a slow poisoning of our souls.

When someone overdoses, intervention is needed. And I feel, even in the church, we have overdosed on our own pride and self-righteousness. We no longer seek God’s way, but our own, heedless of the warning signs.

You might think I go too far in saying all this. We are, after all, in the church of Jesus Christ, are we not? So was Peter. Peter was one of us. He was in “the church.” He was part of Jesus’ original twelve disciples. And yet, Peter needed a dose of intervention from Jesus.

Pick up your Bibles and open up to Mark 8:27. Here is the story of Jesus teaching his “Sunday School class”. His “good little students” are taking a “field trip” through Caesarea Philippi. Like a good teacher, Jesus asks them all a question on the road. “Who do people say that I am?”

Context is everything. It is no accident that Mark says they were near Caesarea Philippi – let me translate that for you – Caesar Philip-ville – King Philip Town. Hundreds of miles away from Rome and yet in far-reaching shadow of the great Roman emperor, Jesus asks them, “Who do people say I am?” Can you feel

the undercurrent here? Jesus could very well be asking them, “Am I greater than the emperor who had this city named after him?”

The disciples hem and haw over this. They say, “Jesus, people think you are John the Baptist, Elijah, or a great prophet.” Good, popular answers. But incorrect ones. So Jesus presses them further. “But what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

That’s a significant question. In fact, it may be the most important question you ever answer in your entire life. And Peter, the exemplary Sunday School student, says, “You are the Messiah.” In other words, “You are God-come-to-save-us.” Peter gets the gold star. He can wear the t-shirt: “I confessed Christ and got it right. Caesarea Philippi, AD 30.” I’m telling you, Peter was one of us in the church. He knew the right thing to say.

The first part of this dialogue makes the second part that much more astounding. Jesus begins to tell the disciples, “This is what being the Messiah really means. I’m going to suffer, be spit on by the leaders of our own people, be brutally killed, and then (the disciples almost missed this part) rise on the third day.” Jesus is crystal clear. There is no mistaking his words.

And Peter can’t stand it. Look at verse 32. “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” How does one even do that? What do you say, “Jesus, a private word, if you please?” Rebuking the Son of God takes a lot of guts, and frankly, a bit of stupidity. Peter, the student, tells Jesus, the Teacher – with a capital T – “There is no way you can let this happen to you!”

So Jesus gives Peter the theological equivalent of a time-out. Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!” Those are words of intervention. You see, Peter’s concept of the Messiah was a man of military power, someone who could kick

Rome’s butt and bring independence to Israel. And in Peter’s mind, it’s awfully hard to be the war hero if you are dead.

By contrast, Jesus explains his concept of Messiahship means being the suffering servant. The Messiah does not value the things of this world; he is solely focused on God’s plan.

As you read verse 34 and beyond, you see that Jesus leaves us no room for following our own path anymore. This is the “End of the Road” sign for us and our pride. Read it again with me.

“Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34) No wonder this was horrifying to Peter. The Roman historian Cicero wrote, "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him, an abomination. To slay him is virtually an act of murder. To crucify him is—what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe a deed so horrible".<sup>2</sup> And not only was Jesus saying the cross was his way, this was also the way his disciples must be willing to walk.

I noticed something in my reading of this scripture. I wonder if you saw it, too. Verse 34 starts with, “Then he called the crowd to him.” Jesus spoke to the crowd, not to Peter, not to just his disciples. That means he is speaking to us, here and now.

Has someone intervened in your life? Have they told you, “Get behind me!”? The thing about following is, you can’t follow someone when you are in front of them! When Jesus rebuked Peter, he used the same strong language that he used to rebuke demons, to rebuke the wind and the waves in the storm. Jesus knows his path leads to the cross, and no one can stop him.

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<sup>2</sup> Cicero, Against Verres 2.66.170.

There is a major difference, however, between Peter and demons or storms. When Jesus intervened in Peter’s life, Peter actually listened. Peter allowed Christ to change him. It took some time, but Peter eventually got it. That ought to give us hope that we can get it, too.

Jesus teaches what real discipleship is. Denial of self. Giving your life to the gospel. Following Jesus. Listening and obeying Jesus. That is what a disciple does.

Sometimes intervention comes off as very arrogant and self-righteous. We want to say, “Who are you to tell me what to do? I can live my own life!” But listen closely, Church. Jesus has every right to intervene in our lives, because he died a humble, humiliating death to save us. Jesus, even though he didn’t have to, earned the right to be our Master by sacrificing himself for us. Who do you want to intervene in your life, when you are falling off the road? Don’t you want it to be someone who loves you?

Intervention, wilderness, rehab – they all point to suffering. The truth is, Christians are called to suffer, but Jesus is with us in our suffering. And Jesus is on the other side of our suffering. Think of how this must have impacted the early gospel readers. They were experiencing persecution and death, but their greatest hope was in the One who overcame death forever. That hope propelled them through some really awful stuff.

Rehab takes us to hard places. It confronts parts of our lives we never thought needed correction. To deny yourself, to take up your cross and follow Jesus, means you must open yourself up to suffering for the sake of Christ. That’s humbling. That’s not easy. Jesus never said it would be.

Allow me to read you this quote from the UMC discipleship website:

“Rehab requires that we give up control for the time being and let someone else tell us what to do.... It is humbling to admit that you can’t fix it on your own, that the disease or the evil has gained control over you, and that you need intervention to get out from underneath the weight of your problem. But no matter what difficulties we face, after taking the first step—admitting we have a problem—we have to take the second step of entering into a time of pain and suffering. The only way to survive is to take a deep breath, trust in the people who love us and in the healing power of grace, and walk bravely into the depths of despair, whatever it may be.... And if we aren’t following Jesus into the path that leads to suffering, then we are heading in the wrong direction.”<sup>3</sup>

Lent gives us the chance to once again move in the right direction. We can change. We can stop being complacent. We can stop putting the values of this world first and instead live for Jesus. Have you heard the scripture, “The Lord disciplines those he loves”? That is from Proverbs 3:12, but there are at least eight passages in the Bible that express the same thing.<sup>4</sup> God intervenes because he loves us.

God does not expect us to walk this path alone. Christ leads the way. He walks with us in the suffering. The Holy Spirit guides us in through friends, family, doctors, nurses, therapists, fellow church members and even pastors. He gets in our face and says, “No, go this way. Turn around. Follow me instead.” He leads us through pain, storms, trials and trouble. He is our pillar of fire by night and our pillar of cloud by day. He guides us through the valley of the shadow of death, using his rod and his staff to guide us, and sometimes, bonk us on the head. It’s

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series/february-25-2018-intervention-second-sunday-in-lent/second-sunday-in-lent-2018-preaching-notes>

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 12:6, Proverbs 3:12, Deuteronomy 8:5, Psalm 94:12, 119:75, Revelation 3:19, Job 5:17, and 1st Corinthians 11:32.

OK. Jesus never expected us to walk a path that he wasn't willing to walk. Jesus goes with us. He goes before us. And if we open up our hearts to receive his intervention, he brings us out on the other side of recovery, or rehab, to a glorious and bright Easter day.

### **Prayers of the People<sup>5</sup>**

*We are in the wilderness.*

*We have lost our way.*

*We cannot fix ourselves.*

*We need God's intervention in our lives.*

*And so do many others.*

*And so we pray:*

**Come quickly to help us, O God.**

*Because people are still kept in poverty or slavery,  
some are in fear from abusers, terrorists, and oppressors,  
some face addiction,  
and some are targeted for unjust treatment because of who they are;*

**Come quickly to help us, O God.**

*Because we need courage and integrity from leaders  
in religious, political, economic, and social life;  
because we love and sometimes struggle with  
our families, friends, and neighbors;  
and because the lives of those who sustain and protect our lives  
as military, civilian workers, and first responders  
are full of challenge and conflict;*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series/february-25-2018-intervention-second-sunday-in-lent/second-sunday-in-lent-2018-order-of-worship>

**Come quickly to help us, O God.**

*Because there are people who need your healing power,  
and some who offer healing through their skill and presence;  
because some have harmed us,  
and we have harmed others by our action or inaction;  
Silence*

**Come quickly to help us, O God.**

***Pastor:***

*Receive the prayers of your people, most merciful God.  
In your compassion, forgive our sins,  
and intervene to free us for joyful obedience  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Silence*

*Pastor: In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven.*

**People: In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven.**

**All: Glory to God! Amen!**