

“I’m Fixed upon It”  
Matthew 16:21–28  
Sunday, March 10, 2024 (Lent 4)

Let us pray: May your Word be spoken, Lord, so that your will might be done, in this world and in our lives, in Christ. Amen.

There is a significant anniversary this week. Anybody know what it is? Four years ago this week, we went on lockdown for COVID. On Sunday, March 8, we gathered here for what we did not know would be our last in-person worship service for six months. And then on Sunday, March 15, we had our first virtual service. I’ve been thinking about that recently because Ridgley and I have been making videos to train our new Elders, Deacons, and Trustees. Instead of trying to coordinate everybody’s schedules and find a time that works to get everyone together, we make videos that they can watch on their own time, at their own pace. But what we found was that in the course of making the videos, we would make a mistake. We would slip up or lose our train of thought for a minute. And when that happened, we were like, “Just keep going. It wouldn’t be perfect if we were in person, so it doesn’t have to be perfect now.”

But during that time four years ago when we were making worship videos, it was a totally different story. If I slipped up, stumbled over a word, lost my train of thought, or got interrupted by the lawn guys (which seemed to happen *weekly*), then no matter how far along I was, I would stop and redo the whole thing. When Ridgley would put the video together, it would sometimes take *hours* to process on her computer. She would send it over to me to look at before we uploaded it to YouTube, and inevitably one of us would see a mistake like a typo in one of the hymns or prayers. *One incorrect word*. No big deal, right? But we would go back and fix it and then spend *hours* processing a whole new video. Because it *had to be perfect*. Even though things are never perfect when we are here together in person, it had to be perfect then.

It was all because of this feeling that so many of us experienced back then (and a lot of people still experience now); this feeling that everything is out of my control right now, but I can control *this*. The world shut down around us, and we had very little (if any) control over where we could go, what we could do, and who we could see. And so we tried to exert control wherever we could.

We need to feel a certain amount of control in our lives. That is a basic human tendency. Back in the 1940s, a psychologist named Abraham Maslow developed what he called the “Hierarchy of Needs,” the five essential things that motivate us as human beings. At the bottom of the hierarchy, the most essential thing, was Physiological Needs like breathing, food, water, shelter, clothing, and sleep. Above that was Safety and Security, things like health, personal security, and family. Above that was Love and Belonging. Above that was Self-Esteem. And at the top, the thing that we can tend to after all those other needs have been met, is Self-Actualization, things like morality, creativity, meaning, and purpose.

In this hierarchy of basic human needs, Maslow placed “control” on the second level with Safety. Right after food, air, water, and shelter. In order for human beings to feel *safe*, we need to feel a basic level of control and predictability in our lives. If everything is unstable, chaotic, unpredictable, or dangerous, we struggle to thrive. *Control* is just as critical to our wellbeing as our physical health, financial security, and family. A few decades after Maslow, another psychologist named Ellen Langer said that a feeling of control is *so* critical to our wellbeing that we will *imagine* we have it, even if we *don't*. It's what she called “the illusion of control.” We benefit from simply *believing* that we have control. And when we *don't* feel like we have it, our anxiety rises, and we don't feel safe.

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Why are we talking about this today? All throughout Lent we have been following the story of Peter, watching him figure out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And today's story is all about the need for *control*.

Last week Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am," and Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." We talked about what it *meant* to call Jesus the Messiah; that he was the prophet, priest, and king of God who would save the people. But one thing that we *didn't* talk about was that for first century Jewish people, they expected the Messiah to be a *real king* who wore a *real crown*, sat on a *real throne* and led a *real army* to defeat the Romans. They weren't looking for a *spiritual* king. They were looking for an *actual* king.

So when Jesus begins to tell his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed, that does not fit with their understanding of who the Messiah is. That is not the way this is *supposed* to go. The Messiah is supposed to *defeat* the Romans, not be *killed* by them. What good is a dead Messiah?

Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. That word *rebuke*, the Greek word for it here literally means, "to charge or order." It is used elsewhere in the gospels when Jesus orders a demon to come out of a person, or he orders a storm to stop. It was used in the story we read last week, when Jesus ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. So Peter here is giving Jesus orders! He's saying, "No, *that* is not what you are here for. *This* is what you're here for! *This* is what you have come to do! *This* is what you're supposed to be about! So stop saying that!"

To which Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!” Seems a little harsh, so let’s unpack that. We obviously have a lot of associations with the word *Satan*, but the Hebrew word *satan* literally means, “adversary,” or, “one who opposes God’s purposes.” And Jesus says to him, “You are setting your mind not on *divine* things but on *human* things.” You are opposing God’s purposes.

When Jesus says, “Get behind me,” that’s not just a way of telling Peter to shut up. It is the Greek word *opiso*, which Jesus uses many other times in the gospels, and he has used it before with Peter. When Jesus first calls Peter, he sees Peter and his brother Andrew fishing, and Jesus says to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” That phrase *follow me* is *opiso*, literally, “Get behind me.” And right after this, when Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,” he uses the word *opiso*. *If any want to get behind me....*

There was a time recently when we took our kids somewhere that they have never been before. And as we’re walking in to this place that they have never been, it was very crowded, and they did not know where we were going, one of them got in front of me and just started walking wherever. And I kind of stop and say, “What are you doing? You have no idea where we’re going. You need to follow me.” That’s what Jesus is doing with Peter here. “You don’t know where we are going. You need to get behind me and follow me.”

This is not just Jesus being mean or rude to Peter. He is *calling Peter back to discipleship*. He is saying, “You have gotten out in front of me. You don’t fully understand who I am, so you need to get back *behind* me and start *following* me again, instead of trying to *lead* me where *you* think I should be going. You are opposing God’s purposes here. You are trying to *lead* me instead of

being led *by* me. You are setting your mind not on *divine* things but on *human* things. You're focusing on what *you* want rather than what *God* wants."

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And how often do *we* do the same thing? How often do we want God to meet *our* expectations, bless *our* plans, and go along with *our* will? When life feels chaotic and out of our control, how often do we try to *exert* control, over God, over other people, over the world around us and life in general? And there's an irony here in that control actually *increases* our anxiety. We try to control *because* we are anxious and fearful, but it ultimately ends up making us *more* anxious and fearful. Because the more we try to control something that is uncontrollable, the more out of control we feel. And then to fight *that* anxiety, we try to control even *more*. It is this vicious cycle where we have to work harder and harder to gain some sense of control that we are never really going to get.

And so Jesus says to Peter and to us, "You need to let go of it. You need to get behind me, *follow* me, set your sights on *me*. Stop trying to make me go where *you* think I should go. *Listen* to me and *learn* from me about where *I* am trying to lead *you*." And Jesus says that if we *want* to follow him, then we need to deny ourselves and get behind him and let *him* lead *us*. Fear leads us to control, to try to save our own lives. But Jesus says that those who want to *save* their lives will actually end up *losing* them. Those who *want* control will actually end up *losing* it. And so what Jesus tells us is that we have to let go of our lives, of the desire for control over our lives, over other people, and the world around us. We have to set our minds on *divine* things rather than *human* things, on what *God* wants rather than what *we* want. We have to say, as Jesus did, "Not *my* will, but *your* will be done."

Now, that doesn't mean that we just say, "Jesus, take the wheel," as we go over a cliff. God does not give us *control*, but God *does* give us *agency*. Agency is the power to influence ourselves and our circumstances. It is less absolute than control. It has limits. Agency is about recognizing that I cannot control God or other people or the world around me, but I can control how I respond to all of that; how I operate within all of that. And what we are called to *do* with our agency is to trust Jesus. To follow him and seek his will for our lives. Jesus says that those who *lose* their lives – not just *die*, but give up their lives, let go of *control* over their lives; those who stop desperately trying to save their own lives – will find *real life* in him.

As we have said throughout this series, our look at Peter is also drawing from the hymn, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." We're looking at a line each week and how it relates to Peter's story. And this week is the line, "I'm fixed upon it." *Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it, mount of God's redeeming love.* And it raises the question, "What are we *fixed upon*?" Our eyes, our hearts, our minds, our lives, what are they fixed upon? Divine things or human things? That doesn't mean we don't *care* about this world or our lives – "Hunger, poverty, the environment, genocide, those are *human things*, so I'm not going to focus on those." No, it means that we seek *God's will* for this world and our lives rather than our own. What does *God* want us to do with our agency about all of those things? Are we fixed on *God's will* or *our own*?

Disciples do not follow their own will. They submit themselves to the will of their teacher. If *we* want to follow Jesus, then he calls us to recognize that this world and this life are not about *me* and what *I* want. He calls us to fix our hearts and our minds and our lives on what *God* wants, trusting that when we let go, he will be there to lead us to *real life*. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.