

“Trees Walking”
Mark 8:22-33
4th Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2024
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

As I’ve shared with y’all before, back in high school, I ran on the cross-country team. And there’s a race from my senior year that has been permanently imprinted into my memory.

Our cross-country team was never the best,
but we had a chance, my senior year,
to beat the team that ALWAYS beat us.

Waverly High School.
Alma matter of the former Atlanta Braves pitcher John Smoltz, by the way...

They were a mile down the road from us.
And every year, in cross-country, they creamed us!
But my senior year, we knew we had the runners to beat them.

So we were ready.

We went on the school announcements...no one ever announced cross country meets on the school announcements—but we went on the announcements, and we said, “Come watch us beat Waverly!”

We invited the former cross-country coach, who was retired.
We said, “Come watch us beat Waverly!”

It was going to be on our home course.
And the day came, the hour arrived.
And the race began.
And I choked.
I ran my worst race of my senior year.

At one point in the race, one of my teammates ran by me with one of the Waverly runners close behind. This teammate was someone I knew I could stay with! I always finished ahead of him.

If I had just gone with him, finished with my teammate, we would BOTH have beaten that Waverly runner, and...I did the math after the meet...if I had done that, just ran like I was capable of running...our team would have won the race on a tiebreaker!

That happened over 35 years ago.

Do you see how these things stay with you?

I can't tell you much about any other race I ran that year.

But I can tell you ALL ABOUT that race.

Why?

Because I failed...

We are now in the third and final month of our sermon series, The Fabric of Faith. And our topic for today...is failure.

Faith...as failure.

How are you with failure?

I won't speak for you, but I RUN from failure...

Our two texts for today—

back-to-back stories in the Gospel of Mark—

have something to do with failure...and faith...

In the second text, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

The disciples trot out the answers:
John the Baptist, Elijah...

“But who do you say that I am?”

And Peter responds:
“You are the Messiah.”

A+ for Peter, right?

It’s the first time that any of the disciples have seen Jesus for who he truly is!

So right on the heels of Peter’s confession, Jesus starts to instruct his disciples about what this means. He tells them that he’ll need to suffer as God’s Messiah, that he’ll be rejected and killed as God’s Messiah...and none of that makes any sense to Peter!

God’s Messiah isn’t supposed to lose.
God’s Messiah is supposed to win!

To bring about the new age of righteousness and peace.
To get rid of the oppressors, overthrow the Romans!

So what does Peter do?
He takes Jesus aside and ARGUES with Jesus!
Rebukes Jesus! Gets mad at Jesus!

And how does Jesus respond?

Does Jesus put on his best pastoral care hat, and say, “Now, now, Peter...I understand this is a surprise to you, and that you’re feeling wounded and angry with me...let’s talk this whole thing through.”

No.

You heard what Jesus says to Peter:
“Get behind me, Satan!”

Whew...no more A+ for Peter.

Our topic today is faith...as failure.

Have you ever failed at something before?
Of course you have.
All of us have.

My second year of seminary, I was a hospital chaplain one day each week.

It was my first experience visiting people in hospitals.
And frankly, I was a nervous wreck.

I didn't like hospitals...didn't like the smell of hospitals, didn't like the feel of hospitals.

The first family I ever visited as a chaplain was in the critical care unit.

They all stood around a bed.
Their loved one was lying on the bed.

I asked how she was doing...they told me.
I asked how they were doing...they said they were ok, given the circumstances.

Then there was this awkward silence, and I didn't know what else to say.

So I just started talking pretty aimlessly.
And then...more silence.

Instead of just offering a prayer with the family and departing, I just stood there, shuffling my feet, praying that someone would say something.

Well, God answered my prayer.

Because the father—the one whose mother was in critical care—he clearly noticed my discomfort, so gave me a warm smile, and he restarted the conversation by saying, “So, Ben...are you in chaplain training?”

All of us know something about failure.
But what does failure...have to do with our faith?

Especially when it's something more serious than losing a cross-country meet...when a marriage falls apart, or a job is lost, or a poor decision leads to disaster...where is God is all that?

Let's take a look at our first text for today.
A blind man is brought to Jesus.
He begs Jesus to touch him.

And Jesus takes the man by the hand, puts saliva on the man's eyes, and says, “Can you see anything?”

To which the man replies:
“I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.”

Do you remember this story?

It's the only story I know of where Jesus steps to the plate...and on the first swing, he hits a foul ball!!

So Jesus touches the man a second time.
And the man is healed.
And then Jesus does this very curious thing.

He sends the man back to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

I've got a note in my Bible that reads:
"some ancient authorities add *or tell anyone in the village...*"

In other words, the man who has been healed by Jesus...he's supposed to keep his newfound vision...a secret.

He's not supposed to tell a soul!!
What a strange thing for Jesus to say.

The whole thing sets up what happens in the next story.

Right after Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah, Mark writes:
"And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

Why the secrecy?
Why the silence?
Why wouldn't Jesus want anyone and everyone to know who he truly is?

The answer...has something to do with failure.

In world of biblical scholarship, this problem is called The Messianic Secret. In other words, half-way through the Gospel of Mark, why does Jesus ask his followers to keep his identity a secret?

Well, think about what Jesus has done up to this point.

He's healed people.

He's forgiven people.

He's fed people.

He's enjoyed a wonderfully successful ministry!

Except for this little incident with the blurred vision on his first attempt at healing the blind man, there's not much to suggest that Jesus' knew much failure in his ministry.

So if the disciples go around telling everyone that Jesus is the Messiah, and this is what the Messiah does—he heals, he feeds, he forgives...would they have it right?

Yes, they would have it right.

But not completely right.

What would be missing?

What has Jesus not done yet?

He hasn't gone to the cross.

Jesus has yet to travel to the place where the soldiers will mock him and the crowd would jeer at him and people would look at his life and say—what a failure!

That's why Jesus tells the disciples to keep their mouths shut.

Jesus came into the world to show the love of God.

And if all the disciples know about the love of God up to this point...is success and popularity and one good thing after another...they'll have picture of God's love, but it won't be a complete picture.

The pastor Tom Are tells a wonderful story about his grandfather. His grandparents were from Batesburg, here in South Carolina. Anyone here been to Batesburg?
I've never been.

All I know is that it's a very small town.
And for most of his grandparents' lives, there was just one doctor in the town.

Dr. Johnston.
Dr. Johnston did everything.
He set broken bones, he gave people their shots, he even pulled the occasional tooth...

One day, Dr. Johnston finally retired.
And Dr. Sheely took over.

Now Dr. Sheely was from Batesburg.
Grew up there, everybody knew him.

He went to college in the Ivy League, did his medical training at Johns Hopkins, and then he came back to the town in which he grew up to take over Dr. Johnston's medical practice.

What a good thing.
No going off to make the big bucks somewhere else.

Coming home, taking care of the community that took care of him...what a good thing.

But Tom Are says that when his grandfather learned this was happening, his grandfather decided to drive 45 minutes to Columbia to see an out-of-town doctor.

And Tom Are said to his grandfather:
Why would you do that?
We've got Dr. Sheely.

And his grandfather said:
"I've known that Sheely boy since he was a boy, and to tell you the truth, he wasn't that good of a boy."

"Did you know," said his grandfather, "did you know that he had to repeat Miss Amick's 4th grade? He failed math."

"Well, he rebounded pretty well, don't you think? He went to Harvard."

"I don't know about any Harvard, but I'm not going to a doctor that can't get out of Miss Amick's 4th grade..."¹

You see the problem, right?
It was true, what Tom Are's grandfather said.
Dr. Sheely had failed math in 4th grade.

But it wasn't the whole truth.
And it wasn't the whole picture.

¹ This story is told by the Rev. Dr. Tom Are in his sermon, "The Problem with Being Right," preached at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, KS, on March 6, 2022.

And what Jesus wants us to know, as best we can this side of Paradise, is the truth about the love of God.

That God's love shows up not just in success, but in our failures too...in those parts of our lives where we KNOW we cannot win:

when the illness cannot be healed,
when a loved one cannot be fixed,
when a relationship cannot be turned around...

God does not run from us.

At those moments, in ways we cannot foresee, the love and power of God is revealed to us.

It's Oscar weekend...

Has anyone here seen the film "On the Waterfront"?

It won the Oscar for best picture back in 1954.

There's a famous scene at the end.

When a worker on the docks name Dugan is going to spill the beans on the mob, he's killed when a load of whiskey boxes "accidentally" crushes him.

The neighborhood priest, Father Barry, goes to give Dugan last rites, and he's fed up.

"Some people think the Crucifixion only took place on Calvary," he says.

"They better wise up...dropping a sling on Kayo Dugan because he was ready to spill his guts tomorrow—that's a crucifixion. And every time the mob puts the crusher on a good man...that's a crucifixion."

Someone shouts for Father Barry to go back to his church.

“Boys, this is my church. And if you don’t think Christ is down here on the waterfront, you’ve got another thing coming!”

Now...I remember the first time I saw that movie,
I thought it was pretty CHEESY scene—
clear cut answers of good and bad,
right and wrong, what a dated movie...

And yet, the thing about that scene is NOT that it’s cheesy.
The thing about that scene...is that it’s TRUE.

Any rendering of God’s love that does not include the waterfront,
any vision that does not include failure, any picture of God’s love that
does not include the cross...it’s a fuzzy picture of God’s love.

It took Peter a while to understand all that.
But just like Jesus gave the blind man a second touch, he did the
same for Peter.

In fact, I think Peter got a third touch and a fourth touch, and a 45th
touch before all was said and done.

The next time you encounter failure in your life...don’t run from it.

Trust that the healing hands of Jesus will also reach out to you.

Amen.