

## **Filled with alarm**

Mark 10:32-34

March 18, 2018

*Jesus and his disciples were now on the road going up to Jerusalem.  
Jesus was going ahead of the disciples, who were filled with alarm ...*

Jesus was ahead, ahead of them on the road. He did not hesitate. His mind was made up. He strode out ahead of them with a sense of purpose. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem, but he was determined to go.

His disciples lagged behind. They were dragging their feet, following but not wanting to. They knew what awaited him, and them, in Jerusalem and they were filled with alarm.

I was filled with alarm once. I was sitting at the edge of a bare rock cliff in the Adirondacks, sitting at the edge of a cliff that fell 150' straight down. At least, I was told it was 150', because I couldn't see. Because I wasn't really sitting at the edge of the cliff, but a dozen or more feet away, next to the trunk of a spruce tree. And I wasn't just sitting next to the trunk of the spruce tree. I was hugging the trunk of that spruce tree and I wasn't going to let go! Because I was filled with alarm.

I watched, one by one, as my classmates walked to the edge of the rock face, turned to face me, and stepped backwards, disappearing forever into the aether! I knew my turn was coming, but I had no intention of letting go of that tree. As long as I held on to that tree, I knew I was safe. As long as I remained clinging to that tree, I was still alive.

Because, you see, I have a fear of heights, and I knew that once I stepped back off the edge of that cliff, rope or no rope, all hope was abandoned, any sense of security I had would be lost, any sense of control I had would be lost, and my life, if I still had a life, would never be the same.

For Jesus' disciples, it was not the edge of a cliff, but a gate, the gate that led into the city of Jerusalem. Once they stepped inside that gate, all hope was abandoned, any sense of security they had would be lost, any sense of control they had would be lost. Their lives, not just his, but their lives, too, were at stake and they were filled with alarm.

This is actually the second time, in a very short period of time, that Jesus' disciples had been alarmed. The first time was when Jesus said to them: "How hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God!" They were amazed, shocked, alarmed. "Then who can be saved?" they asked. If it is so hard for the wealthy, then what about the rest of us?

The disciples seem to believe that rich people enjoy an advantage when it comes to entering the kingdom of God, which makes some sense if you remember what Jewish believers meant by the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was a place where, or more accurately, a time when things would be as

they should be, a day when God's people would live in peace with God as their king, not one regime or another -- Egypt or Assyria or Babylonia or Rome -- lording it over them, a day when people would enjoy long life and good health and prosperity, a day when they would be able to count and count on the tangible blessings of their God.

The wealthy surely then have a head start, one foot already in the door of the kingdom of God. They already enjoy the blessing of having enough and more than enough. They already enjoy the blessing of respect and some measure of power over their own lives.

We, the rest of us, just need to catch up, just need to be given a chance, just need to be given a leg up. But if it will be hard, impossibly hard, for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, if it will be hard, impossibly hard, for the wealthy, the ones with every advantage, to enter that day of blessing, then how do we have any hope at all? Jesus' disciples were filled with alarm.

And so it was on the road, every reluctant step bringing them one step closer to the place where their lives would be forever changed. What was there to gain by going to Jerusalem? And there was so much to lose! His life. Their lives. Any hope for God's kingdom to come. Because the kingdom was about life, about lives being saved, about lives being saved from our enemies.

So how does putting ourselves in danger, playing into the plots and plans of our enemies, bring the kingdom of God any closer? We need to keep our distance. We need to stay safe. We need to ask God to protect us, to give us, to give Jesus, time to build momentum, time to win enough followers so we can face our enemies with confidence, time to set us on the road, not to death, but to freedom, to freedom and well-being. Jesus told us the kingdom is near. We just need time, more time. We just need to wait. We need to wait for God to come.

Jesus did tell them the kingdom was near. And it was. And they didn't need to wait. God had already come. Jesus had been telling them, Jesus had been showing them, all along, but they didn't get it. The kingdom of God is like this, Jesus told them: The last shall be first and the first shall be last. Outcasts will be welcomed to the table and reputable people turned away. The poor will inherit the earth, this earth, and the rich sent away empty-handed.

The kingdom of God will turn this world upside down. Because the kingdom of God is about the king: about serving the king, depending on the king, trusting the king, loving the king. Life can never be won. It can only be received, received as a gift, from the only One who can give it.

Wealth and power and reputation and success and control can get in the way, do get in the way, when we set our eyes, when we put our trust, in wealth or power or reputation or success or control. It is hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God, because they are fooled into believing they deserve what they have. It is easier for poorer people, because they know that every blessing, any blessing, is a gift.

But the way is narrow, the way is hard, for rich and poor alike, for all of us, because if you want to save your own life, you will lose it. But if you lose your life, Jesus said, for me and for the gospel, you will save it. If you lose your life ... But that is alarming!

Jesus is on the road going up to Jerusalem, on the road that leads to? You know the rest of the story! The road leads not to death, but through death, through death to life. If you lose your life, you will save it!

I stepped off that cliff. I descended the rock face, overcome with emotion, bearing the weight of all my fears, and my life was changed, forever. I gave up the place of safety and security. I gave up control. I trusted the word and the help of my belayers, and I was set free. I found a new life and a great new joy. You don't get many views like the beautiful and airy and unencumbered view of the landscape hanging off the side of a cliff!

Jesus told you he is the way. His is not an easy way, and the prospects of following where he leads are alarming. If you do follow, you may lose, no, you will lose your life, at the very least, because it will no longer be yours.

So if you want to be safe, stay in Galilee. Don't go to Jerusalem. Keep hugging that tree. But if you do ... you will never see the view and you will never see Jesus and you will never enter the kingdom of God.