

RIDING HIGH – POISED TO FALL

Many of you, I'm sure, have been on the roller coaster, right? I want you to think, for a moment, of that first hill – the first climb. Do you remember it? So slow. Clickety-clack, clickety-clack, clickety-clack. You watch as it gets higher, higher, higher. And it's all so comfortable, easy, relaxed. But you know what's coming. You know that just at that moment when the clickety-clack slows to almost nothing, that that thing is going to barrel down the tracks at a speed so fast that the next moments will be an utter blur.

But imagine, for a moment, that you didn't know. That you thought the ride was just going to be a breezy ascent to the top of a hill so that you could be dumbstruck at the beauty of what lie below. And then, when your guard is down and your mind is ready to relax, all of a sudden, WHOOSH. You weren't prepared. You didn't know. And the next few moments take you spinning downward while at your most vulnerable moment.

Unwittingly, I'm embarrassed to say, Amy and I did this to our kids about 20 years ago. We took them to Space Mountain at Disneyworld when they were pretty young. We remembered the ride being pretty tame from the days of our honeymoon. And so we told them not to worry. It would be fun. It would be fine. And then we got in. And we were strapped in separate seats. And the ride was in the dark. And the minute it started we knew that this was not going to go well. The next few moments were a parent's nightmare as our kids, completely separated from our embrace, our words, our comfort, were shocked by the ride we told them was going to be a blast.

In our text for today an amazing thing happens. Simon Peter, moved by God's Spirit, climbs to the top of the tracks. A light goes on in his head, an epiphany ensues, and he comes to grasp that Jesus, his rabbi, his teacher, his friend, is something more than just a man – that He is the fulfillment of thousands of years of prophecy and is the Lord of the Universe. He says it plainly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." He rises above the level of understanding that he once embraced, and Jesus' teaching and miracles propel him to the top of his game.

Jesus Himself is impressed. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this *incredible breakthrough* was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And on the rock of this revelation, I will build my church using you!!"

“Well, thanks Lord,” he probably thought. And my guess is, that as Jesus utters these words of praise, Simon Peter feels just great. “Yes, I believe. Yes, Jesus is pleased. Yes, I will do anything for this man – I will go anywhere, listen to His every word, obey His every command. There is nothing more important than Him.” And a little pride wells up inside that is convinced this will be the end all – that Peter will ride on the crest of this wave forever.

But that’s just the moment that the Tempter jumps into action and says, “This guys gotta go down. I gotta work extra hard on him. I gotta use my wiles and my lies and my tricks and my deceptions to cause a great fall. I don’t want him to be strong.” And three verses later we have:

21From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" 23Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Three verses. Three verses. And the train has rolled down the tracks to utter disappointment. Simon Peter goes from, “well done Peter,” to “stay back Peter” -- from “what a climb,” to “what a disappointment.”

Has this ever happened to you? Just at that moment when you feel that God and you are walking side by side – hand in hand – that your faith is at an all-time high and you trust in God with such a strength and such a passion that no one would ever be able to bring you down. And then, almost as if out of the blue, the Tempter puts you in the crosshairs of his attack, and the next thing you know, unwittingly, you have fallen, been broken, deceived, -- and you almost don’t even know how it happened. Once so proud of yourself, now you are ashamed. Once so confident, now you are depleted.

I have seen this look in so many faces. “Just when I thought I was strong, the wind blew me down.” “I went back to drinking. I let myself wander from my marriage. I told another lie, stole another dollar, lost my temper another time.” Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the kings horses and all the kings men, couldn’t put Humpty together again.” That’s how it feels.

Have you been there? I bet you have. Time and time again.

Well, Simon Peter is your patron Saint, because this experience wasn't his only time. Let me take you to another place: the Upper Room. One day before Jesus crucifixion. "Lord, You can count on me. I will always be there for you. Nothing, and I mean, nothing will make me leave your side."

And then, literally just a few moments later, he couldn't stay awake one hour while Jesus prayed. And then, maybe in a few hours, he said, "I don't know the man," not once, not twice, but three times. Denial, Betrayal, Despair. The smooth ride up the tracks, soon came tumbling down, and Peter finds himself feeling utterly alone, utterly broken.

But here's the Good News, my friends. None of this – and I mean NONE of this dissuades Jesus from His journey toward the cross. He doesn't say, "ACH, that Peter and these others, how disappointing they are. Such failures. Such losers. They can't even stay faithful for one minute."

No. He knows that's how we are! He knows it well. And in truth, that's exactly why He came. You see, if we could just be faithful by the sheer force of will, or by sheer determination, or by climbing up the tracks of faith and reaching some high point of spirituality, then He wouldn't have had to come in the first place. He could have just said, "go out there and be faithful, stand strong, live the life I call you to live." But He knows us well – and He knows that, left to ourselves even with the finest instructions, we will fail – every time.

But Jesus didn't fail and doesn't fail. When He determined to rescue us, even though it took Him into the very depths of our iniquitous grime; He was going to succeed. Because His loving willingness to die in our place topples the devil's prideful grasp on us. And His omnipotent overwhelming ability to burst forth from the tomb would declare Him as Victorious King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

I remember there was a time in college when I used to play a lot of doubles foosball. (You know, the game where you flick your wrist and fake plastic soccer men kick the ball??) There was this one guy, Gary Granzotto, who had so much speed and so much ball control at the front position, that whoever played with him always won the game. It didn't matter, it could be a dog, a cat, or fish and they would win. But, I remember it was a common joke after you won a match with him, to say, "wow, we're goooood. Look what WE did." But everyone always knew who won the game.

And that's the same with Jesus. It's not about our strength, it's about His faithfulness, His determination, His power.

Peter learned this after his three vehement denials. When Jesus opened His hands to him in forgiveness and called him to spread the Gospel, literally saying, three time, "Peter, feed my sheep, feed my lambs, feed my sheep," he saw that it was not about how determined HE was to follow Jesus – it was about how loving and powerful His Lord Jesus was when He came to save Him.

And that's what we need to remember. Our ingenuity, determination, or spirituality might seem to win a victory here or there. And we can puff up with pride and overconfidence. But the Devil is a clever one – and he knows that we are especially vulnerable when we start relying on ourselves. So he sends his legions to be hard at work especially in those times when we deem ourselves strong. And tomorrow, after he's played his hand, it could just as well poof away with the wind and leave us in despair.

Picture me playing tournaments with some other partner besides Gary Granzotto. Who knows what will happen, right? Gary was the secret to victory. Without him, it's like Russian Roulette.

Same with Jesus. When we are wrapped in the blanket of God's grace and have Jesus on our side, and the victory is assured. Because His power and His obedience is not dependent on ours. Today that's what we want for these two beautiful girls. As children of a fallen humanity, we want them to be wrapped in the blanket of God's grace. And so we brought to them the waters of life that take their newborn souls and connect them to Jesus.

And as we see their connection we are reminded of our own. And we thank God that He called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

May God continue to bless us, as He did His servant Peter, to recognize our vulnerability. May He help us to see that the seemingly strong times are especially those times when the enemy likes to pounce. But may we also always know that our Savior is our Fortress, our ever-present strength. And with Him on our side, there is nothing to fear.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

13When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. 21From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. 22Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" 23Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."