

“Take Up Your Cross”

Isaiah 50:4-9a • Psalm 116:1-9 • James 3:1-12 • Mark 8:27-38

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Well, I *think* I still have a job here. But I may have forgotten how to *preach*!

I've had a rough couple months. Some of you are aware of what has been going on; others may have heard only bits and pieces. I'll get to the scriptures in a few minutes. First, let me tell the story.

Way back in January I was out for a peaceful run and I tripped and came down very hard on my right foot. The next morning I couldn't easily get down the stairs or walk to church from my house, so I went to Urgent Care, where I was diagnosed with a sprained ankle and referred to an orthopedic doctor. She confirmed that at least two ligaments were sprained, and referred me to physical therapy. That was going fine for a while, until I plateaued. When it was clear I was no longer improving I went back to the orthopedist. She ordered an MRI, which revealed that I had torn a tendon, so the orthopedist referred me to a surgeon. I had ankle surgery on June 11 – which was already five months after the initial injury. I was in a boot for the next six weeks. At the end of that period the surgeon gave me a green light to start resuming light activity, and I re-started physical therapy. There was a little hole at the one end of the incision that hadn't fully closed up, but the surgeon wasn't concerned about it. But somehow some bacteria got into my foot, and late one evening two weeks later I realized that my foot, ankle, and lower leg were not only very swollen, but also quite red and hot to the touch. Katharine and I considered: can this wait till morning? We concluded the answer was “no,” so I headed off to the Emergency Room, where, after an ultrasound and an x-ray and some blood work, the doctor diagnosed me with cellulitis, an infection in my foot. He put me on an antibiotic for ten days. That all went fine, and it looked like the cellulitis had gone away. Then I came down with Covid. That wiped me out – I was taking multiple naps a day, sometimes for hours at a time – but as Katharine reminded me later, my body was now trying to fight off *two* serious issues. When I got over the Covid I returned to physical therapy, but my therapist took one look at my leg and said, “Bill, I think your cellulitis is back.” I was like, “Wait, *what?*” and he said, “Take a look at your leg and foot. Touch it. It's swollen, it's red, and it's hot to the touch. We've got to kill this infection before we can do therapy.” He sent me home and advised me to call my surgeon's office. They put me on an antibiotic again, this time for fourteen days. But three days later my leg was *more* swollen, *more* red, *more* hot, and it felt like it was being squeezed from all directions in a very strong vise. Back to the Emergency Room. They put me on a *second* antibiotic for seven days, in addition to the first, and I asked if they could also give me something to relieve my pain. The surgeon had told me from the start that I could use Advil and Tylenol as needed, but those were no longer doing the job, so they gave me a five-day supply of hydrocodone – which is an opioid – to use as needed. Within a few days my symptoms began to abate. I saw my surgeon for a checkup, who told me I have a

“very odd and unusual case,” and he added a few more days onto the second antibiotic, to make sure that we were effectively killing the bad bacteria. That was about ten days ago. The plan was that I would be on both antibiotics until this past Tuesday, except I woke up last Sunday morning – up at Camp Greenwood – with a skin rash on various parts of my body, that was rapidly spreading. I went to Urgent Care in Greenville, where the PA said I appeared to be having a reaction to one or both of the antibiotics. She put me on a steroid and an antihistamine to address the rash. Later I called the 24-hour-on-call number at my surgeon’s office for additional guidance, and the doctor told me to stop taking both antibiotics immediately and to use topical Benadryl as needed to relieve the itchiness.

Now here’s where a couple significant mistakes were made. I made a mistake in failing to make sure that the over-the-counter meds that my surgeon had been telling me I could use as needed were actually showing up on my regular medical chart. The PA at Urgent Care made a mistake in failing to *ask* me if I was taking any over-the-counter drugs that weren’t showing up on my chart. Ibuprofen and prednisone don’t mix. But I didn’t know that. The next day, Monday, as I was eating lunch, I developed a case of hiccups which quickly escalated into something *far* more serious. Within three minutes I was standing over the kitchen sink, gasping for breath, tears streaming down my cheeks, while Katharine was calling 911. Later she told me 60% of her was saying “this is all going to be fine” and 40% of her was saying “they’re not going to get here in time and I’m about to lose my husband.” The medics arrived, began addressing my distress, strapped me onto a gurney, and loaded me into their ambulance – and one of them said to my wife, “we’ve never seen anything like this.” So, back to the Emergency Room, for the *third* time in five weeks. An EKG, a CT scan of my chest, a bunch of blood work, a variety of meds pumped through an IV to settle my stomach. The ER doctor also examined my skin rash and decided to increase the dosage of the prednisone. She told me to follow up with my primary care doctor within two days. They were able to fit me in the very next day, Tuesday. I came prepared with a typed summary of everything that had happened and all the different meds I had been put on over the past three months, and spread them all out on the table for my doctor to review. He was *fantastic*. If you don’t have a good primary care doctor, *get one*. You never know when you’re really going to *need* it. He carefully reviewed *everything*. When he got to the prednisone, he asked, “Did they ask if you were taking Advil?” I said no. He said that *somebody* should have verified that I wasn’t taking both at the same time. But nobody had. He told me to stop taking Advil immediately. So one lesson here is: *make sure any over-the-counter meds you are taking are showing up on your medical chart!* That could *literally* be a matter of life and death. My doctor told me that what happened to me on Monday that resulted in my ambulance trip to the ER was most likely the result of the combination of two meds that should never be taken together. So I had *two* adverse reactions to meds or combinations of meds – in the space of just two days. *Thank God for meds* – but the wrong meds – or the wrong combination of meds – can *really* mess you up.

Tuesday night and continuing through most of Wednesday, I was experiencing significant gastrointestinal issues. I called my doctor again, and he told me to stop taking the prednisone too. So now, at this point, the *only* extra medicine I’m on is the antihistamine, and I’m not taking anything for the ongoing discomfort in my ankle and foot. My foot is weak and sore, so I’m walking around pretty slowly and have to rest it a lot. After the GI issues, I was on a BRAT diet for a few days, and I’ve gradually resumed eating normal foods. My stomach is doing much better, but still doesn’t feel quite normal. I restart physical therapy – for the fourth time! – on Tuesday; I’ll be seeing my primary care doc in about ten days after some more blood work; and I’ve got another checkup with my surgeon in a few weeks. All of this – everything except the Covid – stems from the simple fact that I *tripped* way back in January!

Somewhere in the Sunday to Monday range – between the skin rash and the ambulance trip to ER – I started humming to myself the lyrics of a song by Hillsong Worship: “What a beautiful name it is; what a beautiful name it is; the name of Jesus Christ, my King. What a beautiful name it is; nothing compares to this; what a beautiful name it is; the name of Jesus.” It was a prayer, a desperate prayer from the depths of my heart. Sometimes, words fail us. When you don’t know what to pray, use the words of the Christian songs you know and love. I remember doing that once before, some 25 years ago, when I was being prepped for surgery. Sometimes, the *best* prayers are the ones we’ve already got memorized.

Now all that is a long digression, and I beg your forgiveness and thank you for your patience these past few weeks as I have been dealing with all of this. I’m especially grateful to both Jim and Charlie for stepping in to preach and lead worship on short notice; in Jim’s case, *less than one day*.

So now, with what time we have left, I want to turn to the Gospel text for the day. This is an incredibly rich passage. Basically, there are three things going on here: first, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is, and who they think he *really* is, and Simon Peter gets it absolutely *right*; second, Jesus tells his disciples all the horrible things that will happen to him, which were contrary to all their expectations, and Simon Peter tells Jesus that he shouldn’t be telling people that, and this time Simon Peter is absolutely *wrong*; and third, Jesus tells his disciples and the whole crowd about how *hard* it will be to actually follow him. I want to focus on that – on what has been called “the cost of discipleship.”

Jesus says: “If any wish to come after me.” Remember: being a Christian means *we’re trying to follow Jesus*. This isn’t about just going to church on Sunday. This is about the way you orient your *life*.

“Let them deny themselves.” Literally this means to “forget oneself” or to “lost sight of oneself and one’s own interests.” That doesn’t mean we should ignore our own genuine needs, or let other people walk all over us or abuse us, or not pursue activities or interests that we enjoy. What it means is that we’re not to put ourselves *first*. Our needs and desires are secondary. *Jesus always* comes first.

“Take up their cross.” Jesus had to carry his own cross for a portion of his last journey through Jerusalem: “So they took Jesus, and carrying the cross by himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him.” (John 19:16-18) To do what God needed him to do, to what Jesus himself had consented to do, he had a very heavy burden to bear, a burden that weighed him down, a burden from which he could not escape. Following Jesus, doing what God calls us to do, is *not* easy. If your life as a Christian is a life of ease, you’re not following Jesus closely enough. There’s something God needs you to do that is *hard*. Go spend more time with the scriptures. Listen and pray. What is God *really* asking of you for the good of the world at *this* phase in your life?

“Follow me.” Make *Christ* the king of your life. Not yourself, not some celebrity or politician, not some sports team, not your job or even your family. “Follow *me*.” That’s *Jesus*, talking to *you*.

Finally: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Jesus is reminding us that while our lives here on earth are important, our *eternal* life is *more* important. The goal of this life isn’t to have the most money or the most toys or the most followers on social media. That’s not what should be driving us. What should be driving us is a wholehearted, sincere, faithful attempt to follow *Jesus, our King* – *wherever* that may lead.

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