

Maumee Watershed District Lent 2018 'Faithful to the End' #4
"Sifted"

Luke 22:31-32 *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren."*

We have been journeying through Lent thinking about how God is, 'Faithful to the End' How God is faithful in the most difficult of times, even when we are tempted not to be.

We are moving ever closer on the calendar to Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. He and the disciples have gone to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, the Hebrews remembrance of their freedom from slavery in Egypt through Moses and the power of God. They have eaten the Passover meal together, they have heard of Jesus' fate, but now learn their fate will be similar to His. Jesus addresses Simon, Peter, but really addresses all the disciples and all of us who follow Christ today –

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren"

Sifting wheat included removing the grain head from the stalk, then removing the husk from around the grain, and then grinding the grain in a stone bowl. They would then try to separate the dirt and remaining chaff to purify the flour. When I was young my mom and grandmother would let me help in the kitchen. They gave me a flour sifter. I don't think grain has feelings, but if it did sifting would hurt a lot. I think Jesus is saying that sifting hurts.

Sift – means to select, examine, scrutinize, sort through, sieve, filter, strain, separate. Satan's desire is to scrutinize us, to strain us, to separate us from God. It is painful. I'll go on record early, I don't like sifting.

This passage tells us Satan asks Jesus to sift Simon also known as Peter. And – Jesus allows it! We need to understand Satan has no power over us not given to him by God. But sometimes Jesus gives that power to sift us. Why? Sifting also means to purify, to separate what is most valuable from what is not. Evil uses sifting to separate us from God and weaken our faith. God uses sifting to draw us back to Him and strengthen our faith.

We also need to know when being sifted we are not abandoned by God. Jesus is still with us; in fact, the Scripture says, He is praying for us. I'll go on record early, I don't like sifting. But I also wonder if Satan doesn't want to bother asking Jesus to sift me – or you, are we doing anything that causes Satan worry?

Most of us can identify sometime of sifting in our lives. The marriage is not going well. We lose the job. Financially we struggle. Health becomes a handicap. The kids are moving out of control. Conflict, confrontation, competition, challenges, all can cause our faith to waver. I

can't say all of that is Evil, but any or all of that can either break us or make us better disciples. All of that can move us further away or closer to our Lord.

The Disciples hear these words of Jesus, but I don't think Simon believes them. He is bold, *'Lord, I am ready to go to prison or die for you.'* Jesus is thinking, 'Really?' Jesus says, *'Before the rooster crows today you will deny me three times.'*

We know Simon. He is the one Jesus re-named Peter – which means Rock. *'Upon this Rock I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it'* (Matthew 16:18). But interestingly, at the end Jesus calls him Simon again. Why? Maybe because Jesus knew he would revert to his old ways of fear, faithlessness and fishing. Sure enough, when it gets intense, Peter denies knowing Jesus, the rooster crows, he runs away, goes into hiding, barricades himself with guilt - only later to emerge. *...but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren."* Peter is not alone and neither are we.

There is Elijah. One moment a valiant warrior on Mount Carmel, facing down the prophets of Baal; then a wounded, whimpering dog before God in fear of Jezebel. He is thinking of killing himself. God would have none of it. He sent an angel to minister to his fallen prophet. Elijah heard a "still, small voice." The voice said, "Return, Elijah, return! I am with you."

There is David. God judges not by outward appearance but by the heart. He is chosen above all others as King of Israel; he is a man after God's own heart. David kills the giant Goliath. But a bigger giant befalls him – a beautiful woman named Bathsheba. His spirit, his heart, his faith is shattered and he runs. Then the words, *"Now the Lord has put away your sin"* (2 Samuel 12:13). "Return, David, return! I am with you."

Peter, Elijah, David, countless others - all sifted. All called to return to strengthen others. How does this work?

1. Know the Level of Our Faith. Is our faith more internal or external? Is faith for inner balance or outward beauty?

Michael Plant was the Top Gun of ocean sailing. He built a \$650,000 racing vessel, lightweight, fiberglass coated, foam core sailboat – scintillatingly fast. Its latest technology cut through the ocean currents like a sushi knife. He named it the Coyote. October 16, 1992 he launched from New York for France and onward around the world. If successful, the race would take four months and carry him 24,000 miles. But early on Plant experienced trouble. He was not heard of for several days. On October 21 a Russian freighter picked up the transmission – *'I have no power... but tell people not to worry.'* That was his last transmission. After 32 days the Coyote was spotted by a Greek taker. It was drifting upside down about 450 nautical miles north of the Azores, with no sign of the solo pioneer. The mast, still fully sailed, plunged some 85 feet into the frigid waters. The hull was intact. The keel was vertical and exposed the fatal problem: the 8400 pound lead keel bulb that kept the boat upright had been sheared off. Without the keel and ballast, it could not stand upright. For a sailboat to navigate the open ocean there must be more weight beneath the waterline than above it.

Is our faith deep inside of us, below the water line, or is it more about surface and appearance? Our faith in Christ is our ballast in the storms of life.

2. How are we at Re-turning? *...but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren."*

The Greek word for *turned again* means to convert, to revert, to turn around. It is kind of like repentance - to turn around and go back again.

Isn't that hard? I think it is so hard. To turn around and face what we have done wrong, to face our Tempter, our temptations, our sin? It was so hard for Simon he went back to fishing, right where he was before he met Jesus.

In the book A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story, William Martin observes that many of the hundreds of thousands who came forward during the evangelist's crusades were not really first-time converts, but are better described as re-dedicators. That was not at all designed to any discredit to the great evangelists' ministry. For is re-dedication of one's life to Christ any less significant, or any easier than our initial conversion?

Was Peter's rededication to follow Jesus any less important than his first decision to leave fishing? Maybe Peter's rededication after suffering such a deep failure was more significant. This second commitment, made in the agony of self-despair, was vital to the church's early growth and to ours.

Peter later wrote, *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy* (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Re-turning is just as important as turning in the first place. Vance Havner wrote, *"God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives perfume..."*

3. Strengthen Others. *...but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren."* A tragedy is a terrible thing to waste. God allows crisis, tragedy, temptation, sifting to come into our lives so we learn how to endure them and turn to strengthen others.

I led a Lifetree Café a couple of years ago where I heard the controversial issue of guns and gun control. Two men gave their personal testimonies – one a professional concealed carry trainer who said one night men broke into his motel room and if he was not armed he would certainly have been robbed and probably beaten. Another time he and his daughters were pursued in the woods by two huge dogs trying to take them down. He believed without weapons they would be dead.

The other was a dad whose son was a victim of the Columbine High School massacre. He said 5 years after the killings, parents were offered the personal belongings of their children. (I can't imagine. Neither could he.) He did not want his son's bloodstained clothes, but he did ask to have his shoes. See, he wanted to walk in his son's shoes and imagine the tragedy of that day for he would have done anything to be with him on that day. But he also wanted his son's shoes as he now travels around our country advocating for the banning of assault rifles and large capacity ammunition magazines.

I don't know which side of the gun control issue you are on, but both those men were working to strengthen others. A tragedy is a terrible thing, but when you have one it is a terrible thing to waste. God uses the tragedy, the temptation, the sifting to strengthen us and make us the best we can be, so we can strengthen others.

When God allows you to be sifted, it means God thinks you are worth it. God sees the purity within you. The faith that needs strengthening to hold you up in the storms of life. God sees you faltering, wavering, turning slowly away from God-self, and is calling you back to His side. And He sees others who fall away and whose faith needs strengthening. God wants us, to use our times of tragedy and pain, to strengthen others. We hate sifting, but count it a privilege for God to see who we truly are and what we and those around us can truly become. Amen.