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Exodus 3: 1 – 15

Psalm 105: 1 – 6, 23 – 26, 45c

Romans 12: 9 – 21

Matthew 16: 21 – 28

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Lewis Carroll, in writing *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, and C. S. Lewis, in writing *The Screwtape Letters*, both created literary worlds where everything was upside down. Or inside out. Mirror images of what life as we know it is like.

In *Through the Looking Glass*, in order for someone to get somewhere, they cannot walk right towards it. If they do, they will find that they are only getting farther away from it. Instead, one has to walk in what seems like exactly the opposite direction from where they are headed. Similarly, in *The Screwtape Letters*, the thoughts, emotions, actions and desires that the main characters consider very good are really very bad and vice versa. From buttoning a shirt to driving to work, imagine trying to do all of our daily activities backwards, or opposite, or upside down, from what we are used to doing! Imagine, for a moment, the incredible mental energy that it would take to think about everything in reverse!

That's the equivalent of what Jesus is asking his disciples to do in their thinking and their actions in today's Gospel passage. Jesus is asking them to think and to see completely backwards, inside out and upside down from what their culture has taught them. He turns their world's values upside down.

In last week's passage, which immediately precedes today's, Peter is the star student. When Jesus asks the very pointed question, "But who do *you* (plural) say that I am?" Peter blurts out "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" In other words, Jesus, you're not just a prophet like Elijah, you're not just a forerunner like John – you're the real thing! You're God's anointed – the Messiah! That knowledge comes to Peter through divine revelation, and not through his own cleverness. But this divine revelation is not enough to keep Peter from thinking further in worldly terms.

Now, in the world of Peter and his friends, a King-of-the-Jews-wanna-be would sit down with their chief strategists and plan the next move. After all, how does one get from being an upstart, grass-roots rebel to being the one sitting on the throne, worshipped and adored by all? Supporters must be garnered. Obstacles must be removed. Perhaps a surprise military coup?

When Jesus' followers, including Peter, think "Messiah," they are thinking "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory and the majesty!" But their idea of greatness, power, glory, victory and majesty are upside down and inside out from Jesus' idea of the same. They want to walk straight towards the glittering image of this savior/warrior/king. Peter and the rest of the disciples have yet to learn that life as a disciple of Jesus is simply not aligned with human expectations. They have yet to learn that the road to greatness, power, glory, victory and majesty leads in the opposite direction through humility, vulnerability, pain, suffering and grace. But they will learn all this soon enough.

In response to Peter's divinely inspired acclamation, Jesus designates Peter – a.k.a. 'the Rock' – as the foundation for his church and grants him and the other disciples great authority. And responsibility. Jesus concludes this interchange by warning his followers not to say anything to anyone about his identity as Messiah. He knows that his disciples have stars in their eyes as they contemplate the near future. He knows that their upside down, worldly understanding of him is not complete. He

knows that God's kingdom will indeed come, but that it will not look like what his friends and followers are hoping for or expecting.

Immediately after this admonition, Jesus turns around and begins the long trek from Caesarea Philippi back to Jerusalem. His face, his mind, his heart are set on what lies ahead. And so, he begins to try to tell his friends what that is going to look like, and that it won't be pretty. He wants them to know what it will really mean for them to follow him. But Jesus barely has the words out of his mouth regarding the suffering and death that await him when Peter, once again acting on behalf of all, quickly strides over to Jesus, grabs his arm and leads him away from the others. Jesus has messed with Peter's vision of a knight in shining armor coming in on a white horse. Messiahs don't suffer and get put to death. That's not the stuff of glory and honor and kingly power! So Peter, right up in front of Jesus' face, reproaches Jesus. "No, you've got it all wrong! We're in it to win it! God can't let that happen to you!"

Then, using the same words that he did back in the wilderness with Satan, the adversary, Jesus shatters Peter's hopes as he counters, "Get behind me, Satan! You – the Rock – are a stumbling block for me!" To be behind someone is to be a position of following where the other leads. To be behind is to not stand in front of, in the way. To be behind is to have someone's back. Turning to face all of the disciples, Jesus lets them know in no uncertain terms that, what it will cost them if they choose to follow him. The question that they each must now answer is: how much they are willing to pay, or to give. What is being a disciple of Jesus worth to them?

In a letter to a lady friend, Benjamin Franklin once told this story about cost and worth. When Franklin was a boy of about 7, he was given a gift of a number of pennies by some friends who were on holiday. Naturally, he went straight to the shop where they sold toys for children. Another little boy was blowing a wooden whistle. Franklin was so entranced by the sound of the whistle that he bought it right then and there, voluntarily handing over all his pennies without even so much as asking the price first. Taking the whistle home, Franklin went all around the house, very proud of the sound that he made, though irritating the stew out of the rest of the family. His siblings and cousins, upon finding out how much Franklin had paid, laughed at him and told him that he had paid four times the value of the whistle. Which made Franklin "very vexed" and he started thinking about all the other things he could have bought or done with the rest of his money. This rueful reflection took away all the pleasure that he had had in the whistle.

This was a lesson well learned for Franklin, however. From that time forward, whenever there was a decision about what to do or what to buy, he would ask himself, "How much am I willing to pay for the whistle?" He also learned to apply this to the actions of others whom he observed. Franklin went on to recount in the letter several examples of men and women whom he thought had given too much for their whistle – whistles of prestige, or wealth or status. "In short," he concluded, "I conceive that great part of the miseries of mankind are brought upon them by the false estimates they have made of the value of things, and by their giving too much for their whistles."

Perhaps it is true then, that what is worthwhile in life is determined by what we are asked – and willing – to give up. 'Go ahead, play it safe, take the comfortable path and live by the world's rules,' Jesus says, to his disciples and to us. 'But what will your life be worth if you give up its meaning?' Or, Jesus says, you can follow me. Which looks dangerous and foolish to the world, but which looks like real life in the Kingdom of God. It might cost you everything – prestige, power, perhaps even your life in this world, but what you will gain is everything. Everything that really matters in the end.

Jesus invites his disciples, including us, to live an inside out, upside down, backwards kind of life in this world. A life that leads to greatness, power, glory, victory and majesty by way of humility, vulnerability, pain, suffering and grace. German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who famously wrestled with the ways of the world versus the ways of God), writing from a Nazi concentration camp, said this: "What remains for us is only the very narrow path, sometimes barely discernible, of taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future." That is the way of the Kingdom, the way of the cross.

When I was growing up, we used to watch "Mission Impossible" on TV. Each week, the assignment would be presented with the words, "Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is..." This is what Jesus is saying to us. Our mission as followers of Christ, should we decide to accept it, is costly by the world's standards. On the other hand, how much are we willing to pay for the whistles of this world? What are our lives worth if we give up their meaning? Should we decide to *accept* our mission of discipleship, what we receive in return is out of this world. That is the upside down-ness, the inside out-ness, the mystery and the paradox of living this life of faith. +