

Pining for the Past in a Forest of Memories – Mark 8: 31-38  
Sermon written and preached by Rev. Don Hammond  
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One of my favorite vistas is at a crossroads of logging roads in the St. Joe National Forest. In a remote part of the forest is the convergence of four narrow, dirt roads. The elevation is near a mile, and from that vantage point I could see the entire mountain that I worked and lived on, Middle Sister Mountain. At the intersection is a U.S. Forest Service signpost made of thick wood with deeply carved letters that were able to withstand the harsh winters, and could last through the years because every winter they would be whipped by wind and covered with snow. Carved into the wood were the names and distances to places like Roundtop 23 miles, St. Joe River 14 miles and Middle Sister lookout 5 miles, with yellow arrows pointing in the right direction. For me it was like sitting on top of the world. The air was always fresh and the blue of the sky intense beyond my ability to describe, the smells of the pine trees intoxicating and it was a quiet as is imaginable. That place and the view would always set me into a peaceful mind.

Many years passed before I was able to return to that extraordinary place. However, the day did arrive and one summer I returned. The anticipation overwhelmed me. To once again be there, and inhale the view and freshness that I loved so much so many years ago excited me almost as much as a child becomes excited on Christmas morning. I left the river road and entered onto the long, winding, and climbing dirt logging road that I traveled countless numbers of times many years before. I had flashbacks. I remembered the night when an elk became caught in my headlights and ran ahead of me up the road for what seemed like an eternity. I remember the elk stopping in exhaustion and finally walking off the road and into the trees. There were many memories, all of them good. I could hardly wait to reach the convergence of roads only a few miles ahead. Upon arriving, I was stunned. The roads were the same, the signs were same but the view was different. In the years that passed, the trees had grown

tall and instead of a vista, I had a forest between the mountain and me. I could not see what I remembered and loved. The mountain and vast area were hidden from my eyes. The trees were beautiful, but the view was more beautiful and I was *Pining for the Past in a Forest of Memories*. I wanted it to be as I remembered and loved.

Do you have such a place? Do you have such a memory that even the thought of it calms and brings peace to you? Perhaps it is a favorite vacation place or something from long ago, perhaps even your childhood. I recall as a child my parents taking us for drives and on occasion they would drive by one of the houses they grew-up in. They would say; “that’s where I use to live, but it doesn’t look the same any more.”

Sometimes we pine for the way something was or the way we would have had it be, and perhaps miss the newness and beauty that stands before us. Peter, the disciple of Jesus, fell victim to desiring the view that they imagined in their mind – the view of what Jesus was going to be. Peter had set his mind and focused upon the way he expected Jesus to be and when he found Jesus standing before him unfolding the beauty of what would be, he resisted and tried to make Jesus fit his image and expectation:

Jesus said, “...*he would undergo great sufferings, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and doctors of the law; to be put to death, and to rise again three days afterwards. ... At this Peter took him by the arm and began to rebuke him.*” Peter, what a failure you are! Peter, you desire the view that you so greatly wanted, and failed to see that the trees had grown and created an entirely new spectrum of beauty that was beyond your appreciation.

Among my earliest memories of the church as a boy are the hoards of us children that were everywhere on Sunday morning. Every classroom every Sunday morning was filled with kids – lots of them. I even remember partitions being put in the fellowship hall in an effort to create more classroom space. It was the 1950s and there were many children.

I was ordained in the late 1970s and from that moment to now the most common concern I have heard from people of the church is “why can’t it be like

that now?" Where are the hoards of children as we remember them when we were young? One day early in my life as a pastor a man of the congregation asked that question of me. Having read somewhere how some other pastor cleverly responded to that question I chose to respond in like manner. "How many siblings do you have?" I asked. "There were five of us." "Do they all live around here?" "No, most moved away." "How many children do you have?" "Two," he responded. "Do they live here?" "No, they moved away." That is why we don't have as many children as we had in the 1950s. Yet some folks pine for what use to be.

The church today is not like the church of 50 years ago, and I doubt it will ever be that way again. In truth, I hope it never is that way again. Not that I would not want the church building to overflow with children, but all things change, including the work of the church. The needs of 50 years ago are not the needs of today. If we *Pine for the Past in a Forest of Memories*, then we are most likely not going to see that which stands before us now.

Peter wanted Jesus to live and become the coronated King of Israel. Peter wanted Jesus to take control and evict the invaders and others. Peter probably envisioned himself holding a cabinet position or perhaps even being Vice Messiah – remember when James and John asked Jesus to be seated at his right and left when he came into his glory? Their vision of "glory" was a coronation, not a cross. All the disciples were not getting it. They were somehow missing what Jesus wanted and were living off their own vision. They were expecting something entirely different than Jesus was giving. They were expecting an incredible view of a Jewish kingdom with Jesus on the throne, but instead found a tall forest that restricted their imagination and they resisted.

Perhaps we are not terribly different from those disciples. Perhaps we too expect the view we use to know or imagine and curse the forest that has grown to block it.

In my years of being a pastor I have heard a plethora of reasons why people have decided to leave a church.

Theology is too liberal or too conservative

Too much Bible or not enough Bible

Too boring or too busy and I could go on.

The only reason I have never heard is the only one that I think is a good one. I never heard of anyone who left the church because of Jesus, and in all honesty, that is, in my opinion, the only good reason to leave. Yes, you heard me right.

What Peter, James, John, and the other disciples did not get is the same thing that is still easily missed today. Jesus said, "If you are going to be one of mine then here is what you have to look forward to – you are going to be sitting in the splendor of a wonderful view. You are going to suffer. Your life will become difficult and in the end you will end up just like me – on a cross."

Now if there was ever a good reason to leave the Church, then that is it. Come on Jesus, we want the good stuff. You know what we mean.

- We want the classrooms full of kids,
- We want the parking lot filled with cars
- We want everything that is going to lift us up and make us happy. After all, times are tough Jesus, we don't want to be thinking about cross' we want to hear encouraging words about a bull market and a growing economy
- We want to hear words that will tell us everything is going to be okay if not in this world then at least the next.
- We want to hear about building projects, because we need the space, instead of hearing about having too much building.
- We want to hear things that are going to make us laugh, smile, and take us away from the bad stuff.

That is what we want, but instead you are telling us the view that we desire is gone, and now we need to pick out a fine tree from the forest that will suit the building of a strong cross which we are going to get tacked upon? Come on Jesus, your timing is awful. Jesus said to Peter, you just don't get it. You just don't get what I need from you.

William Willimon relates a story about his visit to a church.

*“I was admiring the beautiful sanctuary. The church had just gone through an expensive renovation of its historical sanctuary and had installed an impressive new pipe organ in the front of the sanctuary. I admired the beauty of the room. Still, something seemed to be missing.*

*‘You probably notice that we don’t have a cross in the front, in the chancel,’ said the host pastor. I had to confess that I had not noticed.*

*Frankly, once we got the new organ installed, dominating the front of the church, there just wasn’t room for the cross.”*

If ever there was a good reason to get out of the church, or perhaps a good reason for not getting into it, it is because of Jesus telling us what it is going to take to be one of his, and it is not filled with breath taking views and heart-warming experiences. Being in the Church is about changing your story. It is not so much about changing your story from what you are, as it is what you are changing your story to.

Jesus was writing a new story, and it would become a new story for any who would follow him. It is not a story about the past, but is a story about the future. It is not a story about recreating what we long for or miss, but it is a story about a world becoming new, where truth and peace flow like an everlasting stream.

Pinning for the past will never prepare us for the future. There is need, however, for those who are willing to go forward and follow and face the uncomfortable demands of being one of his. There is a need to go forward, remembering where we came from but understanding it as a tool in preparing us for where we are to go. There is a need to go forward, even when it threatens danger and leads to a cross. People that are willing to do that are hard to find, but Jesus seemed to believe that those people are among us. He seemed to believe that those hardheaded disciples will one day “get it,” and then the world will be upon a new course. Are you one of them? Are you one who will pine for the past or one who will drive toward the future?

Amen.