

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 12, 2021

(Mark 8:27-38)

By show of hands, how many of you have seen the movie "Patton"? This is an incredible film ... and one of my favorites ... and in my personal opinion George C. Scott's work in the title role is one of the best if not the best performances of his career. (I also think he shines as Ebenezer Scrooge in a 1984 adaptation of "A Christmas Carol," but that is a different discussion for a different season.)

In the opening sequence of the film, Patton is shown speaking to the troops of the Third Army. It's intended to be a motivational speech inspiring them to face the difficult work ahead in the war in Europe. In his remarks, Patton says the following: "Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser."

Loving a winner and not tolerating a loser. This line came to mind as I read this passage from Mark's Gospel. As we well know, today's scene takes place in the shadow of an oppressive regime, a time of difficult rule by the Romans and their allies among the local authorities. Nearly 100 years had passed since the Roman general Pompey and his legions conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC and subjugated Israel as a part of the empire.

The Jewish people were crying out for a messiah, someone to drive out the invaders and restore their independence. In the context of the line from "Patton," Israel desperately wanted a winner and was quite tired of losing. Now, in this man Jesus, his 12 closest friends and followers thought they had finally found the one to fulfill that promise. Here, they must have thought, is the winner who will bring all of our people's suffering to an end. Peter was certainly quite firm in his belief, answering Jesus quickly when asked about his identity by saying "You are the Messiah."

But then in the very next instant, everything changed. This man who Peter had just declared to be the Messiah was now – quite unexpectedly – telling them he would face suffering and death. The very one who many expected to help them win the race against oppression was instead sharing a vision that seemed to point to anything but victory. The message of hope certainly seemed to be coming off the rails.

Peter, of course, reacted to this based on instinct rather than vision ... and he began to rebuke Jesus. What in the world might that have looked like? Here, we don't know. In the parallel version of this narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, we know that Peter said, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps he

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:22 (NRSV).

said something similar to that here, or maybe it was something even more passionate or insubordinate. I can certainly picture the other 11 and anyone else within earshot cringing at this scene, wondering to themselves, “What is Peter thinking?” All we do know is that he quickly went from praise to criticism – and the subsequent rebuke from Jesus was even more swift.

Now on the one hand some may be inclined to think that none of this needed to happen. Peter did not have to make the mistake that he did when he stopped listening to Jesus’ words before the full message had taken root. All he heard was that Jesus would be rejected, suffer and die. What he missed is that he said he would rise again after three days. Had this wonderfully impetuous and emotional disciple been able to keep focus for just a moment more, he would have heard everything Jesus was trying to say.

But that’s not what happened, and because Peter jumped the gun we have been given a powerful lesson. I think the lesson is this: in whatever situation we find ourselves ... whatever sense of sorrow or hopelessness we may be feeling ... whatever fear or anxiety we may harbor ... those moments are not the end of the story. You can go back through many scenes in the Old and New Testaments and arrive at a point where things should have ended ... and then you can reflect on this simple fact: the story went on.

Abraham was instructed to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice to God; what if he hadn’t stopped to hear the heavenly voice instructing him to lower the knife? Moses had fled Egypt, a prince outcast for raising his hand against the violence of an Egyptian taskmaster; what if he hadn’t stopped to answer the voice whispering to him from the fiery bush? What if Mary hadn’t listened to all of the words of the archangel, or Joseph hadn’t listened to all that God warned him of in his dream?

In each instance, the stories of these men and women had not ended – and they knew their journeys would continue in remarkable new directions because they heard all that God was telling them. Even though Peter didn’t hear everything Jesus was trying to tell him on this day in Caesarea Philippi, and despite missing the important end in much of what Jesus shared during his earthly ministry, he eventually learned to wait until he had heard everything. Peter, the flawed disciple and imperfect friend on whom the Church would one day be built, quit stopping in the middle and began listening until the end.

The great New York Yankees catcher and part-time philosopher Yogi Berra got ribbed many times in his life for the often wacky things he said. Hardly the most elegant of speakers, many of his more famous sayings were based on a sort of folksy interpretation of what he observed. One of his most famous, one which I’d be willing to bet you have heard many times, is that “[I]t ain’t over ‘til it’s over.”

It's a line that while silly on the surface will most definitely preach. It's a line that is incredibly significant. It's a line that I think would have fit perfectly into today's narrative from Mark. I can easily hear Jesus adding it on as a postscript to what he says to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. And besides, it ain't over 'til it's over."

We shouldn't allow ourselves to get fully bogged down in the difficulties we experience. As admittedly hard as it is, we shouldn't allow ourselves to get stuck in the mire of the difficult moments. We should do what Peter did not take time to do: allow hope to sink in and remember that there is more to the story than we see in any single moment.

We must always ... always ... listen to the end.

Amen.