



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – November 9, 2008

Dead Ends and New Life

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Psalm 42

¹As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

²My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

³My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

⁴These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

⁵Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help⁶ and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

⁸By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”

¹⁰As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,

“Where is your God?”

¹¹Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Luke 24:13-32

The Walk to Emmaus
(Mt 16.12—13)

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” ¹⁹He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” ²⁵Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

We say, "I'll believe it when I see it." We somehow know that words, representations and arguments are all subject to manipulation, but sight, "seeing for yourself," now there's a rock solid measure of reality. Everybody knows, "seeing is believing."

Unless, of course, it's not. Unless markets melt down, investments evaporate, careers collapse and we realize we had not been seeing reality plainly. When Alan Greenspan testified that he was shocked that markets did not work as anticipated, he was saying he didn't see it coming.¹ Seeing wrongly, he had believed wrongly. And believing wrongly, he had seen wrongly.

Perhaps you read the recent David Brooks column in *The New York Times* predicting that the financial crisis would be the coming-out party for behavioral economists: economists who contend that our ability to see, to perceive, is always skewed by unconscious expectations and projections.² First, our minds tend to simplify the storyline of past experiences, reducing complexity to digestible patterns. Then, our minds tend to shape the way we see the present and anticipate the future so as to fit new perceptions into the storylines and patterns we have learned in the past. Our ability to see new possibilities in the future is thus almost always colored by the way we learned to see old realities in the past.³ Seeing wrongly, we believe wrongly, and believing wrongly, we see wrongly.

Some years ago, researchers designed an experiment in which the subjects were shown playing cards in rapid sequence and tested on their ability to accurately identify the cards. But just as the subjects got into a rhythm of calling out "eight of diamonds" and "Queen of Spades" the researchers introduced nonconforming cards into the decks: a six of spades

that was colored red instead of black, a King of Hearts that was colored black instead of red, and so on.

At first, all the subjects simply misidentified the wrongly colored cards. But as the scientists slowed down their display of the cards, the subjects became increasingly confused. Eventually, most of the subjects caught on that this or that card was the wrong color, and they began identifying them correctly. But some subjects were never able to make the adjustment. One exclaimed, "I can't make the suit out, whatever it is. It didn't even look like a card that time. . . Oh my God!"

It is one thing to be wrong or disappointed in life. It is another thing to lose confidence in your ability to see the world plain at all. You and I are each destined to bear our measure of disappointment and discouragement in life. But our disappointments are never so acute as when they cause an entire world view to collapse.

The more fundamental the assumptions overturned - the deeper the dislocation and despair. And when life overturns our most fundamental assumptions - our assumptions about our ability to provide for ourselves and our loved ones, about the promises and demands of life, about the goodness and trustworthiness of God - our dislocation and despair become existential. It can seem as if the very foundations of our hope have crumbled away. Unable to see a way forward, we lose hope that there even *is* a way forward. "I didn't see it coming," becomes, "I don't see any way out."

So it was with Cleopas and his companion as they trudged the seven sad miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Like the other followers of Jesus, they had sacrificed everything to follow him. Months of bone-weary travel, hunger pangs and homesickness had all been justified by the hope they saw in this charismatic young prophet.

What had they hoped? They tell us, even as they told the stranger who suddenly joined them: they had hoped that Jesus - this "prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" - was the long awaited Messiah, come to deliver God's people.

And, like the experimental subjects looking for a red King of Hearts, they knew exactly what they were looking for, for their vision had been shaped by

generations of priestly teachings and selective Bible readings: what they had been trained and prepared to see was a messiah of overpowering might who would sweep away all opposition and hardship, chase away all pain and sorrow and guarantee victory.

As Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom and worked His miracles, the followers saw what they had been taught to see, and seeing *was* believing. Until, of course, it wasn't. Until, that is, the crucifixion. Overpowering Messiahs are not nailed to crosses. Conquering Kings are not carried limp and cold to their tombs. The crucifixion was the dead end of their hopes. Worse, it was the utter collapse of their world view. "We didn't see it coming," became, "We don't see any way out."

Into this Emmaus walk of despair and disappointment, Luke tells us, "Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him." Like the experimental subjects who weren't prepared to recognize a King of Hearts colored black, these disciples weren't prepared to see a suffering servant messiah. "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

So what does the unrecognized stranger do? He walks them back through the scriptures, opening to them the passages, the pattern, the way of seeing they had missed. Think about it. God had not prevented the Israelites from slipping into Egyptian slavery, but God *had* sustained them through their bondage to liberation. God had not spared the Israelites their wilderness years, but God *had* sustained them through their lost wandering to their homecoming in the promised land. God had not blocked their Babylonian captivity, but God *had* sustained the Israelites through their exile to restore them in Jerusalem and their temple. Just so, God had not spared God's Messiah His suffering on the cross, but God had sustained Him through the crucifixion to His resurrection.

No wonder their hearts burned within them! As the resurrected Jesus blessed and broke the bread with them, their sight became clear and they recognized Him, for they had now learned to see the shape and promise of the victory God had worked for them. Their disappointment gave way to exultation, their despair gave way to renewed hope, their dead end opened up into new life. They hadn't seen it coming, but now they *could* see the way out. They could see the

way through, and it led back to Jerusalem, back to the others, back to discipleship in the name of the risen Lord.

Why does Luke include this story in his Gospel? Perhaps because we too need to learn a new way of seeing. Perhaps because we too have learned to look for a God who reflects our personal fantasies more than the divine reality. Perhaps because we too have learned to look for a God who stands ready to sweep away all opposition and hardship, to chase away all pain and sorrow, to guarantee victory with no particular demand or expectation from us. Perhaps because we too have faced painful setbacks that have challenged our vision of God, experiences that have cast us onto our own dead end road to Emmaus.

Perhaps you have struggled with anxiety and exhaustion. You cast yourself upon Jesus, praying fervently for the peace that passeth understanding. But the demands of life have multiplied and thrown you back onto your road to Emmaus. "But I had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem me from stress."

Perhaps you are struggling with financial insecurity. You cast yourself upon Jesus, praying anxiously for a rebound in the markets, or a call back to work or a quick jump to a new employer. But the markets keep sagging, and everybody in your division is looking for work, and the prospective employers are actually contracting rather than expanding and looming mortgage payments have thrown you back onto your road to Emmaus. "But I had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem me from financial adversity."

And now our walk to Emmaus can seem pretty grim: perhaps there is no God after all, or perhaps there is a God but we are so guilty that we don't deserve God's customary protection, or perhaps our entire world view, our very way of seeing, collapses. Our, "We didn't see this coming," has become our, "We don't see any way out," and we are cast into the dead end of despair.

These walks can be times of bitter disappointment, but they are also opportunities for re-learning to see, openings to a new way of life. For even as you trudge on, the Bible says Jesus Himself will come near and walk with you. With His help, the scriptures can open a new way of seeing God. Not a God who beats up all your enemies and establishes you as the high and

mighty master of the world, but rather a God who leads you to new life by walking through the pain with you to the other side. Not a God who provides magic protection from the harsh realities of life, but rather a God who promises you sufficient strength and love to press through these realities to your own victory and joy.

My friends, I am not just a preacher who proclaims this, I am a fellow pilgrim who has lived this. I know God did this for me, and I know God wants to do it for you. I know the dead end of despair can open up into a new life of hope. I know these things because they happened to me.

I didn't leave my law career because joy and prosperity led to faithful inspiration. I left because for 17 years I was sure I saw a path down which I could achieve a balance of meaningful work, time with my family and income for home and tuition. I was sure I saw the path; it's just that I could never stay on it. I was not seeing reality plainly. Seeing wrongly, I believed wrongly. And believing wrongly, I saw wrongly.

After scores of cases, hundreds of all-nighters, thousands of days on the road there was no longer any way to even pretend that my vision would ever be realized. The all-nighters were just more frequent, the cases all the larger, the courtrooms even further away and my time with my family ever shorter.

As I slipped into despair and dysfunction, it never even occurred to me to pray for a different career. What else could I possibly do that would come even close to meeting our monthly expenses? I was well and truly stuck in a dead end in which there was no way forward and no way back. My, "I didn't see it coming," had become my, "I don't see any way out."

My prayers, such as they were, were as cramped as my vision. "God, lessen the demands of my cases." "God, reduce the expectations of my partners." "God, send me more competent associates." "God ease the pain of my despair." And, had God actually answered the prayers as I lifted them up, I would probably still be a lawyer today. Rescued from the most acute sources of my pain, I would have had just enough strength to hold on to the contorted, half-life I was living. But that's not what God did for Israel,

that's not what God did for Jesus and that's not what God did for me.

Instead, God sustained me on my wilderness walk. God set me on a path to more joy than I ever would have found on my own. God showed me a way through my dead end and into my new life.

My friends, this is the God I proclaim to you this morning. If your, "I didn't see it coming," has become your, "I don't see any way out," then this is the God I know is yearning to lead you from dead end to new life.

Of course, if you are like me, then your prayers will probably start with your own plans. God preserve my job. God restore my bonus. God get me that transfer. Jesus tells us to go ahead and pray for what we want, and it may be that God will answer your prayers exactly as you whisper them. This I do not know. But here is what I do know: Christ is yearning to walk alongside you through and beyond any dead end looming in front of you. Christ is yearning to show you a path to more life and more joy than you can even imagine for yourself. It may not be the path you are praying for. It may not be a path that you think is possible. It may not even be a path you think you want. But maybe, just maybe, that's because you haven't yet learned to see the brighter vision Christ has for you.

See if your heart doesn't burn inside you as you feel his presence. See if you don't recognize him in the communion feast. See if you aren't then moved to rejoin the others and spread the great good news to the rest of the world. Then, finally, your seeing will be believing, and, what is more, your believing will be seeing. **Amen.**

1 "Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders' equity, myself included, are in a state of shocked disbelief." Alan Greenspan, quoted in *The New York Times*, October 23, 2008.

2 "Perceiving a situation seems, at first glimpse, like a remarkably simple operation. You just look and see what's around. But the operation that seems most simple is actually the most complex, it's just that most of the action takes place below the level of awareness. Looking at and perceiving the world is an active process of meaning-making that shapes and biases the rest of the decision-making chain.

Economists and psychologists have been exploring our perceptual biases for four decades now, with the work of Amos Tversky and

Daniel Kahneman, and also with work by people like Richard Thaler, Robert Shiller, John Bargh and Dan Ariely.

My sense is that this financial crisis is going to amount to a coming-out party for behavioral economists and others who are bringing sophisticated psychology to the realm of public policy. At least these folks have plausible explanations for why so many people could have been so gigantically wrong about the risks they were taking.” David Brooks, “”The Behavioral Revolution,” *The New York Times*, October 27, 2008.

3 “Taleb believes that our brains evolved to suit a world much simpler than the one we now face. His writing is idiosyncratic, but he does touch on many of the perceptual biases that distort our thinking: our tendency to see data that confirm our prejudices more vividly than data that contradict them; our tendency to overvalue recent events when anticipating future possibilities; our tendency to spin concurring facts into a single causal narrative; our tendency to applaud our own supposed skill in circumstances when we’ve actually benefited from dumb luck.” Ibid.