

Sam woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, his blankets, covers, and sheets kicked off, and with his pillow in a big jumble at the end of the bed. He sat bolt upright in bed, looked around, looked at his clock, and looked over at his wife sleeping next to him. Finally, he touched her. She woke up just long enough to say, “Stop touching me. Go to sleep.”

But that’s not what he wanted. He just wanted to make sure that she was there, that she was real, because he had one of those dreams, He felt like he was Ebenezer Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol,” and it was so vivid, it was so real that he had to stop for a moment to make sure that it wasn’t, to make sure that he had another chance.

He couldn’t sleep. He got up and he sat downstairs thinking over what he had dreamed. And finally the next day he called in sick and then called his pastor to make an appointment.

He hadn’t had much conversation with Pastor Jim over the years because it didn’t seem like they were on the same wave length, but today he wanted to talk to Pastor Jim. He came in, sat down. They made small talk for a minute or two, the kind of “Hi, how are you? How are things going? How are the wife and kids?” kind of things, and then he said, “Pastor, I have to tell you about my dream.”

Jim said, “You had a dream?”

“Yeah. It really, really bothered me.”

“Ok, go ahead.”

“Well, I dreamed I had died.”

The pastor said, “Well . . .”

“I dreamed I died, and I’d gone to heaven, and as I was looking around everything was deserted.”

“Everything was deserted?”

“Yeah. Oh, there were trees and grass and streets and houses and buildings of all kinds. There just were no other people.”

Pastor Jim said, “You got to heaven and there were no other people. Are you sure it was heaven?”

“Well, yeah. It was heaven. I mean Jesus came finally, and he welcomed me, and I blurted out, I couldn’t think of anything else to say, I mean, Jesus right there in front of you in heaven, you’d think . . . , you’d think you could think of something else to say besides, ‘Where is everybody?’ But that’s what I said. I said, ‘Where is everybody?’

And Jesus said something strange to me, he said, ‘You were expecting other people?’

And I said, ‘Well, yeah. I’d kinda hoped that maybe my family, you know, or somebody else, anybody else. I mean, am I the only one who made it?’

And Jesus said, ‘No, of course not. Lots of other people. God loves everyone. I died for everyone.’

‘Well then why am I the only one here?’

‘Well, you know your favorite hymn. You sang it nearly every day of your life, hummed it to yourself, thought about it. “I come to the garden alone,” you sang, “and He walks with me and talks with me,” but it never mentioned any other people.

And when you talked to other people about your faith, you claimed me as your personal savior. And there’s nothing wrong with that but your meaning was private. How you imagined me in life is how you get me in death. So here I am, and here you are. Isn’t this what you wanted? Isn’t this what you wanted?.....’

‘And suddenly Jesus faded away, and I woke up. And I just wondered . . . can you tell me . . . is that what heaven’s going to be like for me . . . because if it is then I’m quitting church right now.’”

Pastor Jim, as was his custom, didn’t answer right away. He sat, stroked his beard and thought.

Finally Sam said, “Well?”

Pastor Jim inquired, “Well, what do YOU think your dream is about?”

Sam answered, “I’m not sure. Do you really think how I imagine Jesus now will affect what happens to me in heaven later?”

Pastor Jim answered, “That’s a good question. I’m not sure. Why don’t you tell me more about who you think Jesus is?”

Let’s leave Sam and Pastor Jim for a minute.

Taking Faith to the Edge

I suppose we all wonder sometimes what heaven’s going to be like, and we all imagine that it’s going to be full of people and all kinds of other things. But like Sam, I find that what we think heaven will be like has everything to do with who we think Jesus is. Who is Jesus for you?

Jesus is asking his disciples that same question. Not only “who are other people saying that I am,” but “who do you say that I am?” Of course getting an answer to that question is very complicated because Jesus is not a simple man. He does lots of things for lots of people. But the question that I’m asking you is the same question that Jesus asked the disciples, “who do you say that Jesus is?”

One of the ways to get at the answer to that is to take your life to the extremes, take it to the very edge and see what you find there. That’s what happened to Sam.

In his dream he was taken to the very extreme of his ideas and his ideals and his thoughts about what Jesus was, and at the edge of things, at the very place where his ideals meet the world they collapsed, they didn't hold together.

Either Jesus was not able to deliver the promises that Sam assumed that Jesus was making, or the promises that Sam assumed were different from the ones that Jesus was making. I suppose Sam is a victim of that old saying, "Be careful what you wish for, it might come true." But what about us, when we take our faith to the edge of things, where our lives meet the world, what does it mean to have Jesus as our Savior, as our Lord, as our Messiah?

You see, Peter had the right answer in today's lesson, Peter was able to say, "You are the Messiah. You are the Christ. You are the Anointed One of God. You're the one we're supposed to follow."

Yet when Jesus began to sit down with his disciples and teach them what it meant for him to be Messiah, Peter who probably literally seconds before had made this bold proclamation, suddenly finds himself on the defensive and finds himself needing to take Jesus aside.

"Jesus, get over here. What are you doing!? Messiahs don't suffer. Messiahs don't die. Messiahs take control. Messiahs rule! Messiahs smash their enemies and put us in power."

Peter had the right words, but the wrong ideas. The disciples and others who supported Jesus thought that the Messiah, the king of kings was going to build a great army and take over the world. But that was not Jesus' plan.

So he said to Peter "Get behind me, Satan. You're putting your mind not on divine things but on human things. You're thinking about what you want, about how you want to be in charge and control, and that's not what you get with me."

Then, in order to get his message to the disciples and the crowd Jesus pulls everybody in and tells them one more time what his mission is here on earth.

He tells them that he is here for the sake of others.

What this means is that we are here at church, we have a faith in God, in Jesus — and the truth is — that it isn't about us. It isn't about us saving our lives. It isn't about us guaranteeing our spot with Jesus in heaven. It isn't about us at all.

It is instead about Jesus, about his way of the cross, his way of being in the world not for himself but for the sake of others. He found himself with the poor and the outcasts in life, and he ended on a cross — he died so we no longer have to worry about death. Instead we can live our lives dedicated to each other, helping one another and carrying out the mission that we think we are called to carry out.

Let's drop back in on Sam and Pastor Jim.

Taking up the Cross

Sam talked a little bit about who Jesus is for him. Sam and Pastor Jim read the passage from Mark's Gospel, "Who do you say that I am?" Then Pastor Jim calmly, gently said, "What would happen if you would imagine your life as a Christian differently? What would happen if you would imagine Jesus' call to suffer and die for the world as your calling also? What would happen if your faith in Jesus Christ was personal but not private and sent you into the world along with other Christians to proclaim that God reigns through healing not brokenness, through the restoration of relationship, even relationship that is unwanted by the popular, by the rich, by the famous? What would happen, and how would your dream turn out differently if you would see Jesus that way?"

Sam thought for a moment and said, "I'm not sure." Then he looked up and looked Pastor Jim straight in the eye and said, "But you're sure that heaven isn't like my dream?"

Pastor Jim said, "Yes, I'm sure."

Sam, relieved, said, "Ok, I'll think about the other stuff."

Pastor Jim said, "Well, tell you what, why don't we get together and talk in about a week and see what you've come up with."

Sam said, "I don't know. A week might not be enough, but I'll call you."

So they shook hands and agreed that they would talk again soon. But as Sam went home, he realized that probably what he should do, what would do him a lot more good is if he would go back and listen to God a little bit more and find out what God was actually doing in his life and asking him to do in return. And so he got out his Bible and read once again, “For what good will it do if you gain the whole world and forfeit your life.” And then he prayed.

And about a month later he talked to Pastor Jim one more time and said, “I think I’m gonna be ok.”

Pastor Jim said, “I’m glad.”

We all have this image of who Jesus is....which goes into the question that the Forward Leadership group has asked this year as well — What is the church?

Who we believe Jesus to be directly influences what we believe the church is —

So I thought it would be great to have some time dedicated this year to asking what is the church — and then go through our defined goals....the things that we value the most in our congregation.

What is Worship?

What is Prayer?

What is service?

What is Education?

What does it mean to welcome?

Each week I will define what I believe these things mean — from a Biblical perspective, and from the perspective of someone who has been a part of this community - but not for very long.

The questions are important. What does it mean to be a church community in Gardner, MA in 2015 — this will help us discern what our future will be like as a church dedicated to respond to and share God's love with all people.