

The Life Not Lived
March 9th, 2014

Matthew 4:1-11
Lent 1 A

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<read text: Matt 4:1-11>

Anybody here remember that show *This is Your Life*? I don't. Waaaaay too young for that. But it's enough of a cultural event that I'm familiar with how it goes. A person gets sort of ambushed, brought up on stage and then shown all the good about their life, all the people who they've made an impression on or vice versa. Lots of feel-good sentimentality and happiness. Lots of warm fuzzies.

What would happen though, if something like that was done honestly? If the analysis of a person's life wasn't meant to be heartwarming but instead accurate. How would you feel about appearing on something like that. Oh I'm sure at first brush you might be a little nervous but comfort yourself with the idea, "Oh I really don't have anything to hide, I'm a pretty good person, it'll be fine." But if you really think about that I'm sure the mild nervousness might break into a cold sweat. We've all done things we're really not proud of. We've all said some pretty embarrassing things. And what if they had access to the stuff we've thought? If they really could find out everything about us, expose it in the light for all the world to see...would the good really outweigh the bad? And even if it did, would that matter? The bad would be so humiliating, so embarrassing, would people even take note of the good we did as well?

That's sort of a twisted picture of what it might be like to stand before God at the end of our lives. To stand before him under his judgment. To hear him list off the crimes that you have committed in your life. One by one, down the stretch of your life it goes. Imagine that day when you stand before the Judge. At that time you will finally really understand. You'll really know what it means that he is God and cannot be bought, bargained or trifled with. No silly excuses or circumstances will be allowed. There's no evidence you can present in your own favor. There's no part of what went on in your life that he does not know about. You just have to stand there as he speaks.

"I see here that you had numerous opportunities to either trust in me," he says, "or to trust in yourself. I made you promises, promises I have never failed to keep for you, but I required you to be patient and to trust without always knowing the hows or the whys of the situation. You had the choice to trust me or to grab for yourself what you wanted."

Head hung low, you know exactly what he's talking about. God did say that if we put him first, he would provide for us everything else we need in life. Food and clothing, home and family, whatever we needed for our daily needs. And you remember all the times you didn't trust that was true. How many times you didn't think you would get what you needed if you gave that time or money to God first. How many times you put your own pleasure in front of what God asked of you. How many church services or Bible studies were skipped not because you couldn't go, but because you had something else you wanted to do instead. How many times the offering check was written a little smaller because you didn't trust God to provide enough or even worse, because you didn't want to give up some unneeded luxury. So many times. So much shame.

The Judge checks his notes.

"It seems you trusted in me each time," he says. "Well done."

It doesn't make sense, but before anything can be said, the Judge reads on. "I gave you clear and specific directions on what was good and what was evil in your life. Clearly written commands on what I expected and what was best for you. You had the choice to take them to heart and live in the spirit of them each day, or you could bend the letter of the law to try to get away with as much as possible, violating the clear spirit of the commands while holding to the empty letter of them."

Again the knife twists in your stomach. So many times when you were younger and more foolish, how often didn't you try to skate the edge of the laws God laid down for us. How often even now do you try to see how close you can get to taking his words literally while ignoring the spirit behind them so you can get away with the things you want to do? Instead of trying to do what your God asks as best you can, instead you try to get away with as much as you can while still being able to say that you did what was right. But nothing is hidden before this Judge. And all your flimsy rationalizations about why this or that wasn't really the wrong thing to do, they are very clearly wrong. You've harbored anger and grudges, you've backbit and gossiped, you've manipulated to get your way but you try to sugar coat it with one thing or another to make it seem acceptable. You realize it never was. There was no love in those actions, they were deliberate misunderstandings of what God said to try to get him to say what you wanted him to. Instead of listening to him entirely, you took what you wanted, in whatever way you had to, to justify thinking or saying or doing what you wanted. But now you know how wrong that was.

"You held to my words in their true sense at every opportunity," he says. "Well done."

Again, it makes no sense, you know what you did, but again before you can formulate a response, the Judge continues. "I asked you to be faithful to me, to love me above all else. I deserve this love from you. I am your creator and provider. Everything you are and have comes from me. I have asked that you put your full love and trust and fear in me above all things. I alone am to be worshipped as God. You had the choice to make me your God, or to trust in something or someone else."

The heart breaks a little more. You did know God. You did trust him, but you know it wasn't as well as you should have. It wasn't complete. There was trust there. From the time you were baptized you trusted him as your God. You knew he would never leave or forsake you. You knew that he would care for you. But most importantly you knew that he would save you despite your failures. When young you didn't know all the ins and outs of how this would happen, but you trusted. As you got older more of the details became clear of how he would save you.

But still, you know that God wanted a complete trust in him in all areas of your life. He wanted you to worship him alone as God at all times...and that wasn't done. Other things got between you and him. A pretty or handsome face. A career. That favorite hobby. The strength of your own arms and the skill of your intellect tempted you away from giving him all your worship and instead you worshipped the love and praise of others, or you worshipped leisure time or you worshipped yourself. Standing before the Judge you understand finally that worshipping doesn't mean calling it god or bowing down before it, it just means that it was more important to you than God, it was something you trusted more than God. You were tempted by the call to throw off the Lord and live life the way you wanted. You chafed under his commands, thinking them restrictive and boring, wanting to do just what you wanted to do, wanting to enjoy the pleasures of the world rather than him. The desire was always there, the Lord was not always your God, not in the way he should have been.

The Judge eyes you again, and checks the record. "You have always kept me as your God. Well done, my good and faithful servant. Now come, take the inheritance prepared for you."

As you are led away to the eternal dwellings prepared for you, let us imagine the puzzlement still holds. What the Judge said, that was not your life. You know full well what you did, you know the crimes you committed and you know what should have been read out for the entire court to hear. But what the Judge described was something else. It wasn't the life you lived, it was something else.

Of course, the scenario I described is not exactly what will happen on that day. And on that day we will know the truth of the matter and won't be puzzled by it at all. But too often right now, we forget. We try to forget the truth of what we have done because it shames us, but when we feel that shame, we forget the truth of how God sees us. God does not see us as we are in our faith. He sees us as his Son lived. He does not see the life we have lived, he sees the life Jesus lived for us.

And when Jesus was tempted, he did not fail like we have. He had the choice to wait and trust his Father to provide for him, to trust that his Father had him led to the desert without food for a reason, or he could grab food for himself. He chose to trust patiently. He had the choice to subvert God's word, to take a passage meant for our comfort and to abuse it for a daredevil stunt. But he chose to understand God in his entirety and to take him at his meaning. He had the choice to worship the Lord God and serve him only, or to chase after the hollow powers and pleasures of this world. He chose God. Everything we've failed at, Christ has done. And everything Christ has done, by faith, he has credited to you. He did die on the cross to pay the punishment for the sins we've committed, and he rose from the dead to promise us that we too would rise someday. But just as important is the life he lived as our substitute. God does not even see our sins any longer by faith. He looks at us and he sees the life we did not live. He sees the life of his Son, Jesus.

This is your assurance, your comfort. By faith, we do try still to live a life that God would be proud of, but only to show our love and thanks at what he has already done for us. We will always try more and more to make that life more like what God would want, and we study his word to learn that better what that is. But when we do fail, we can recognize what we've done wrong but we don't have to burn with shame or guilt. God has forgiven those failures through our trust in him, forgiven them and forgotten them through the life and death of Jesus Christ, our perfect substitute. Amen.