Text: Mark 9:30-37

**Introduction**

I was having a discussion with a friend, well maybe acquaintance might be a better description. He’s one of those guys you keep getting thrown together in various ways. Life paths and questions too similar not to attempt to get along, but some fundamental differences such that if life didn’t keep you connected, you probably wouldn’t. I’ll call him John to protect the innocent.

John’s a bit younger, the family maybe not growing anymore, but still children. And he stayed closer to home such that many of the families and people he grew up with are active parts of life. And John was both reflecting on his fellow siblings and the church, kids and parents he grew up with. And his basic question was “what happened?”

By what happened, I mean he was reflecting that the spiritual state of that entire cloud of people was largely gone. Of his fellow siblings only he himself was still connected to a church in any meaningful way. With his sister marginally connected. Part of this was John’s insistence that it wasn’t his parents’ or church’s doctrine or teaching. One of those fundamental differences popping up. John and family were generally of an American Evangelical style church. And he would never accept my law of worship is the law of belief arguments. That as much as you might claim you didn’t, if your worship changed, your belief did so as well. Beliefs being expressed in action, witnessing belief in the fruits. You just might not know it yet, needing to see the mature fruit. But for this conversation I just conceded those well worn arguments. Because John wasn’t focused on his siblings, but the parents and kids that had formed the core of the church he remembered. And he recounted all the work they had done in those years, and how it had all come to nothing. And that he’d see these fathers anguished at the apostasy of their kids, but usually in silence. And how many of the mothers had just drifted along with whatever the kids came home with. John’s personal concern was “how do I prevent that with mine?” But there was honest anguish as well. And that story is spread across enough different types of churches that any argument that I might like – you traded solid food for thin soup in American Evangelicalism – isn’t very convincing.

There are of course the deep mysteries of the faith, which John was willing to accept. When you ask why some walk away, some of the answer is always the doctrine of election. Jacob I have loved, and Esau I have hated. Now we aren’t Calvinists, so we don’t hold to a double election. That God consigns some to hell by his sovereign choice. The bible says that God desires all to come to knowledge of Jesus Christ, and that God so loved the world – all of it – that he gave his son. The work of Jesus Christ is not a limited atonement. It is a profligate spreading of the seed. Should we find that we have persevered in the faith, give thanks to the Spirit who has not only Called, Gathered and Enlightened us, but Sanctified and Kept us in the faith. Should we be reflecting on those who have not. It is a reminder that we should repent and pray for them to do so also. If we find we are saved, the glory is Christ. If we find we are damned, we have done it to ourselves. John was not waving away that mystery. But the problem with mysteries is that they don’t tell you what to do. They are consolation. They are invitations to draw nearer to God. To let the mystery be. Not to know.

And John wanted to know. “What happened?” Which was also a hidden, “what can I do?”

**Text**

I hope I am not abusing our text today, but my conversation with John guided my meditation for this sermon in a way I wouldn’t normally read it. Our gospel reading is Jesus’ second passion prediction. Jesus will three times tell his disciples roughly what is going to happen in Jerusalem when they get there. “The Son of Man is going to be delivered in to the hands of men, and they will kill him. And after he is killed, after three days he will rise.” And every time the disciples hear this they have a slightly different response. But none of the responses are good. The first time Peter confronts Jesus and tells him there is no way that is going to happen. That is not the messiah. At which Jesus says, “get behind me Satan.” The second and third times are closer. In the third James and John step forward and ask for the thrones on either side. Ok Jesus, if you are going to die, someone is going to have to take over this mission. Anoint us. This second prediction has the beginnings of that. “They had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” The prediction of the passion is taken by the disciples as the time for succession planning.

**Christology**

Now the assumption of the disciples in all three cases is rather clear. The messiah – the mission of messiah – is a success. There is no way that the messiah is going to die. Ok, if the messiah is going to die, then one of us who follows must be the new leader to ensure the ultimate success. Jesus, give us the throne.

And this is absolutely the way of the world. The world prizes success. We all know what worldly success looks like. It looks like money and power and fame and influence and crowds. And of course the wheel of fortune turns, but that turning for God’s chosen is just narrative spice. Temporary setbacks until the ultimate success. The Kingdom come.

And we do preach that the Kingdom certainly comes. In fact we confess that Christ already sits at the right hand of God the Father. We preach the resurrection. And that is victory. That is success. But that success, the Kingdom, is not of this world. That Kingdom is the life of the world to come.

In this world you will have trouble. This world kills the messiah. Success according to Jesus is very different from success according to this world. Instead of seeking after money, power, fame, influence, crowds, thrones, dominions, etc. “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” Success in this world is domination. Success according to Jesus is service. Success according to this world is self-actualization. Success according to Jesus is the giving away of the self.

In this world we lose ourselves, so that we might receive our eternal life. Receiving in service the helpless child. That last one who could ever help us get to success in this world. That is receiving Christ. And in receiving Christ, we receive also the Father.

**Moral**

And that is the question. Do we want our kingdom, or do we want The Kingdom. We can only really pursue one of them.

That was something of my answer to John – “what happened?” We became too worldly. We craved success. We forgot that success doesn’t look like what this world says it does.

If our three great enemies are The devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. I told him that I think we still understood the flesh. When the temptation was directly fleshly, we taught against it. And I added that I don’t think Satan himself was what happened. That in that moment of testing, when Screwtape or Old Scratch himself was revealed, most Christians would be prepared. The answer to “what happened” was the world. A generation had been put to the test on which Kingdom they wanted, and they chose their own. Professing to care about kids like no others, they would not receive them. When the challenges of service came, they opted out. When the way of the cross was revealed as low status and often the way of worldly losers, we were not prepared to walk it.

What happened? We chose the world. And we received in our flesh the due penalty. We received what we had chosen.

**Eschatological**

Now in these things there is always a bit of preparing for the last war. The church is not likely to be offered the world again.

But to the extent that we don’t want to follow the same path, we have to be courageous enough to ask.

We have to ask for understanding of the test.

We have to ask for repentance where we have gone after the world.

Which is a way of saying we need to ask for the Spirit. That when our test comes, we might be kept. That we might desire The Kingdom, and not our own.