

Life Interrupted
(Mark 10:46-52)

The parable is told of an old dog that fell into a man's well. After assessing the situation, the man sympathized with the dog but decided that neither the dog nor the well were worth the trouble of saving. Instead he planned to bury the old dog in the well and put him out of his misery.

When the man began shoveling, initially the old dog panicked. But as the man continued shoveling and the dirt hit the dog's back, a thought struck him. It dawned on him that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back he should shake it off and step up. This he did blow after blow. "Shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up!" he repeated to encourage himself.

No matter how painful the blows or how distressing the situation seemed, the old dog fought panic and just kept shaking it off and stepping up! It was not long before the dog, battered and exhausted, jumped triumphantly over the wall of that well – his life interrupted but not over. What seemed as though it would bury him actually saved him – all because of the way he handled life interrupted. Please pray with me.

Creator God, Christ the Healer, we know you never promised us a rose garden. We know you do promise us life beyond this life – eternal life. But in the midst of transcending this life we encounter life interrupted that tests our faith. Open our hearts

and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed. Give us strength in times of despair. Teach us the truer meaning of your healing plan for our lives – if not in this life, then in the next. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Life interrupted! From time to time our lives are interrupted – like that poor old dog that fell into that well. The life interruptions we face from time to time come in all shapes, sizes and varieties. The loss of a job creates uncertainty and the possibility of economic instability. Unemployment is life interrupted. Divorce is life interrupted for mom, dad, the kids and other family members. It creates adversarial relationships, pain, guilt, and uncertainty.

The loss of health is most certainly life interrupted. There are many folks in our congregation who have experienced life interrupted as a result of health concerns. Automobile and motorcycle accidents are life interrupted. Little-known diseases are life interrupted. And the all too well-known dreaded cancers are life interrupted.

Then, of course, there is always death. Death permanently interrupts our lives as we are left behind to grieve the loss of a family member or friend – or to face financial uncertainty, loss of companionship, and loneliness.

But life interrupted isn't always

negative. In fact, it can sometimes be positive. Most women who have ever given birth will tell you that pregnancy is life interrupted! But well worth the interruption.

As an itinerant elder in the United Methodist Church I know that life interrupted can come at anytime – at the pleasure of the bishop – as I am always subject to being moved to another church.

Life interrupted is a dilemma for most of us. If we respond to life interrupted in a positive way by refusing to give in to panic, bitterness, fear or self-pity, the adversities that threaten to bury us usually have the potential to be blessings. Forgiveness, faith, prayer, praise, and hope are some of the biblical ways we shake it off and step up out of the wells in which we find ourselves from time to time – like that poor old dog.

This morning's lesson from the Gospel of Mark tells the story of life interrupted. The story begins with Jesus and the disciples leaving Jericho to begin the climb up to Jerusalem. Jericho, in fact, is in a valley. It's an uphill hike from Jericho to Jerusalem. But that note about geography is also an important footnote to the larger story Mark is telling here.

This story is the final episode in Jesus' public ministry before he enters Jerusalem and the events of that last week leading up to the ultimate life interrupted – the crucifixion. However, simply by saying that they are "going up to Jerusalem," Mark is telling us something about his understanding of the events that will unfold.

With that phrase he makes it clear that Jesus is continuing the road well-traveled by the kings of Israel's past. Once a year the kings were required to

leave their royal trappings at home and go down to Jericho to climb up to the holy city with plain folk to receive God's commission to continue to govern Israel with justice and integrity.

Mark understands that Jesus is on his way to a different kind of enthronement. His throne will be the cross – an instrument of death and shame. But his journey is interrupted before it even begins by a blind beggar. The on-lookers respond by trying to silence the beggar, but he persists, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus, the would-be king, stops to acknowledge this man with no name. In fact, in Mark's text, his name is not given. He is known only as the "son of Timaeus." In Aramaic, you see, *bar* means "son of." Bartimaeus then means simply the son of Timaeus.

We know how this story ends. Jesus heals the blind beggar. But let's look closer at this life interrupted. Jesus, we believe, must know what it is the blind man wants. But Jesus listens to the beggar's cry, "Have mercy on me." Jesus doesn't presume to know what is needed. He waits for the blind man to tell him. Is the beggar looking for a few alms to buy food for his family?

In the course of life interrupted, Jesus tells his disciples to call the blind man. He stands up and throws off his cloak and comes to Jesus who asks the question. "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "What do you want me to do for you?" This seems to be an interruption in the logic of the story. Surely Jesus must know that what the beggar wants is to be able to see. We can almost hear the surprise in the blind man's voice when he says, "Why Rabbi, I want to see."

"Be on your way," said Jesus. "Your faith has saved you. Your faith

has healed you." And just that quick the beggar recovered his sight and followed Jesus down the road. Your faith has healed you! All of us have experienced life interrupted. Some of us have experienced life interrupted more than once. And unlike the blind beggar who is made well by his faith, a consequence of life interrupted is often the interruption of our faith.

Even people with great faith, conviction, and understanding experience an interruption of faith when their lives are interrupted. It is a very normal reaction to a very abnormal situation. It's a part of our human condition to question, to ask, "Why me, God? Why me?"

I once had a friend who was suffering from inoperable brain cancer. She wanted to talk with me about her faith. Diane was an amazing woman. Rarely have I seen anyone exhibit such faith and understanding. Yet even Diane had concerns about strengthening her faith as the hopelessness of her cancer began to close in. She had a very unique way of dealing with faith interrupted.

Diane had a solid, tangible image of eternal life. It didn't simply exist in her mind. This image was framed and sat near her each day. She also had another solid, tangible image that hung from a gold chain around her neck.

She had these tangible things to remind her of her faith and the strength of her conviction that God doesn't do bad things to good people – or even to bad people for that matter. Whenever her faith would waver – and she had reason to doubt – she would reach for those tangible images to remind her of the faith she had shared for all those years.

I admired Diane and I told her so. Perhaps we would all be better served in our faith if we too would acquire real concrete images of what we believe. And perhaps we could all learn something from that old dog in the opening parable. When life is interrupted don't panic. When faith seems to have abandoned you, don't just give up. When you are tempted to abandon your faith, remember that Jesus also questioned his faith – in the garden and even on the cross.

We can learn much about faith from that old dog. Remain calm. Shake off the dirt that life is shoveling in on you. Then step up. Shake it off and step up – over and over as you get closer to the light from above. We can also learn much about faith from people like Diane. When ever we talked about her faith I always left having had my faith strengthened.

Although Diane had these solid, tangible images that helped her hold fast to what she believed, she also knew that faith is not just a noun. Faith is not something we possess. Faith is also a verb – something we live out or live out of.

When you encounter life interrupted think about that old dog in the well. Don't panic. Remain calm. Shake off the dirt being shoveled in on you and step up. Or think about my friend Diane, or other people you have known in your life. Acquire an image of heaven and the love that God in Christ has for you – an image that fits what you believe. And always remember that life interrupted and faith questioned always go hand in hand. Even Jesus questioned his ability to face life interrupted.

And always remember, it's not a bad thing to question your faith. Faith

unquestioned may very well be false hope and not faith at all, particularly in a life interrupted. As you acquire images of your faith, always remember that faith is not only a noun. It's also a verb.

Faith is not something we possess but something we live out during the course of life, even in the midst of life interrupted.