

I've recently been reading two of biographies of Stalin by Stephen Kotkins and Allen Bullock. Stalin was the Soviet Dictator responsible for the famines there in the 1930s that killed millions of people. He is reported to have said about it, "If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that is only statistics." There is doubt whether Stalin actually said that, but it accurately conveys his attitude – and it expresses a truth. Our minds and emotions can be overwhelmed by big numbers, whereas one well-told story can move us to tears.

Today I want to preach about Jesus' mission to save humanity from sin and death through His cross and Resurrection. This is the central point of the whole Gospel. But it can leave cold. It's something we might believe as true intellectually, but it may not stir us. It's too abstract. It's statistics. So, here is a way of looking at what Jesus did that might bring a different perspective.

In our gospel today what is Jesus doing on that afternoon, walking by the river Jordan? At first, it can seem that this is a story of Andrew

and others searching for the Messiah, Jesus. But notice that when Jesus meets Simon for the first time Jesus gives him a new name. Jesus already knows Simon Peter! He already knows all about Him – enough to give him a nickname. Jesus was looking specifically for Peter.

In light of that fact, I want to use an analogy to describe Jesus' real relationship with each of us human beings. Imagine that I am a rather clueless suburbanite, who doesn't get out in to the woods much. But I decide to go hiking one day – by myself. I need to unwind. So, I drive off into the Cascades . . . without food or much water, or heavy clothing (It's still autumn and I only plan on being out a few hours). But I make stupid mistakes. I take the wrong trail. Then I start walking on what I think is a trail but isn't. I'm getting tired, so I turn back, but head in the wrong direction. At first I don't know I'm lost, but it's getting dark. Actually, it starts to rain – then to snow. It's only early November! I start panicking. I start running further into the forest. In the next day

or two (I hadn't told anyone I was going hiking. Dumb!) I'm missed.

Eventually my car is found at the trail head. What happens next?

The Word goes out. The rescue operation starts. The State Patrol, the Ski Patrol, the Forest Service, the Cub Scouts – all head into the woods as the first heavy snow of the year comes down. My picture appears on the news. Hundreds of people's lives are disrupted – maybe even endangered. A million dollars is spent on overtime, and vehicle operations – for days, or even weeks. All for just one stupid idiot – me.

When you read about or watch the news of such search and rescue operations what do you think? Maybe you start with, "What an idiot. Let him be eaten by a bear." But you probably deep-down think, "Yeah, what a waste of resources . . . but we have to do it. I hope they find him." Maybe you even say a prayer.

Why? It's not like I'm all that valuable. I'm not going to bring about world peace or invent a real, working hoverboard. Remember I'm just an idiot. I got myself into this mess and couldn't get out of it. I'm

just lost and powerless, utterly dependent on someone else – who owes me nothing -- to rescue me.

And that is what Jesus did – and does. The Word goes out. And He, the Word made flesh, placed His life on the line – and lost it. Not for humanity in general, but specifically for me: a little person, except to Him. He has a name for me: even a nickname, because He has known from the beginning of time. He knows that I'm not going to do anything great here on earth as the world thinks of it. But I'm not just an idiot. I'm part of Him. Isn't that why we're OK with the efforts to save foolish people? They are part of us. Heaven help us if the day comes when human beings won't risk hundreds of lives to save one.

Just one. That what's so important to remember against Stalin's cynicism and our human weakness before big numbers. One reason the faith is so dead to us so often is that it isn't personal. It's statistics. It doesn't mean much to us to know Jesus died to save all humanity. It's too abstract.

But the story of one person dying of hunger – that can still bring us to tears. The important thing to realize is that Salvation History is all about one person – me, and you, and you, and you. All heaven was mobilized, God Himself leaves His office, or whatever, and personally takes control of the helicopter searching for ME! And it's going to crash, and He'll die, but in landing at my feet will bring all the forces of safety to me.

That is what Jesus is really doing by the River Jordan. That is what Jesus wants Simon to know when He tells him his nickname. It's as if He's saying, "Yes, I know you've been running around the dark woods looking for a way out. So, I've come looking for you, because you are worth leaving heaven for – and worth dying for . . . you Peter, Andrew, Kurt. Because to me you are not a statistic, but beloved child of God."

I haven't ever been lost in the actual woods, but if I were I think my reaction upon being rescued would be humility at my neediness, and deep gratitude that so many did so much just for me. Do we feel

that way about Jesus? If we don't, then it just means we still think we're on the right trail in the woods. We don't realize we're lost - yet. But when we do, let us remember this story of Jesus. It will change everything.