There is a story that probably isn’t true about King Canute, but since it’s a good story and helps illustrate the point of my sermon, I am going to use it. If you are into English history, you know that King Canute lived from around 990 to 1035 and was king of England, Denmark, and Norway. At some point in his reign, he was surrounded by sycophantic courtiers telling him just how wonderful and powerful he was. In response to this flattery, he ordered his throne to be set by the seashore. He then sat on the throne and demanded the incoming tide to halt. Obviously, the tide did not obey and continued to do its thing getting the king’s feet and legs wet. Eventually, King Canute leapt back from the throne and out of the way of the oncoming water saying, “Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings, for there is none worthy of the name, but He whom heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws.” King Canute realized the limitations of humanity and that no matter how much we may demand there are certain things we cannot control. And as today’s Gospel demonstrates this lack of control might be a good thing.

Our Gospel begins with Jesus explaining to the disciples that he “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” We know the story and so its contents are not very shocking. But we need to realize that the disciples were hearing this for the first time so would have had a much different reaction. Peter who very rarely had a filter reacts to this news by rebuking Jesus. We are in Mark’s Gospel, which tends to be brief, so are not told the contents of the rebuke, but whatever Peter said, we know he objected to what Jesus was saying. Writ large Peter was explaining to Jesus that even though he may technically be the Son of God he did not quite understand how to do his job. Naturally Jesus does not agree with Peter’s assessment and says, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” It is quite the rebuke of Peter’s rebuke. And certainly, Peter had it coming but since we are in church and this is a sermon, we cannot simply stop with Peter being presumptuous and ruminate on just how wrong he was. No, instead we need to delve deeper into what setting one’s mind on human things means and how we also do it to the exclusion of setting our minds on divine things. So, let’s get into that.

In today’s Gospel Jesus first explains how the messiah thing is going to work out and part of that involves him dying. Most likely this was the part of the narrative that sets Peter off. From a human vantage point one of the great things about being God is that you do not get killed. You get to assert your will on other people not the other way round. And because of this understanding, Peter decides to set Jesus straight. He wants his human understanding to override Jesus’ divine understanding. Of course, this rebuke takes an incredible amount of hubris and it would be nice if we no longer did such stupid things. That is, if we no longer told God how He needs to behave to be a proper God by our standards. But unfortunately, this still happens and in fact may have gotten worse in the last two thousand years. I am sure all of you have a non-Christian friend who finds the attributes of the Christian God objectionable. And while we may not go that far all of us still may have certain things in Christianity for which we do not care. So, for the rest of the sermon, I want to focus on two things. First why the idea of rebuking God makes no sense and then look at the small ways in which we, as Christians set our mind on human things and decide that God may not really know what He is doing.

To answer the question of whether rebuking God makes sense, let’s look at the Pythagorean Theorem because who doesn’t want to think of the mathematical theorems in church. If you remember the theorem states that for a right triangle A2 + B2 = C2. Meaning that if you square the lengths of the two shorter sides of a right triangle and add them together you get the squared length of the longest side. Now for ease we will say one side is three inches and the other four. So, if we square them and add them together, we get twenty-five meaning the length of the third side is five. Hopefully that was easy enough. And if not, don’t worry too much about it, there will not be a quiz. Now let’s say we decided we did not like the Pythagorean Theorem and that it went against our sense of what is right and wrong. Would that change anything about what it tells us? Could the long side of the aforementioned triangle be 106 instead of 5 because it feels better? Of course not. Its ludicrous to even think that about because the Pythagorean Theorem just is. The truth of it has nothing to do with how we feel about it or how we would like it to work. And so, the question becomes why do we sometimes feel that we can give God advice or judge Him on His actions? That is why we believe we get a choice in how He goes about his business.

Now this lack of control could be a very frightening prospect if we believed in capricious gods like the Greeks and Romans did. But the God we believe in and worship is not that way. We worship a loving God. Which is wonderful, but it also means we need to be careful. What I mean by this is that for some reason we tend to think that love means we get our way. But as we all know this is not the correct definition. Love means wanting the best for others and because of this God has certain rules and ways he believes we should conduct ourselves. Just as we don’t let our children play with chainsaws, God’s rules may not be what we want but they are in our best interest. Our problem when we disagree like Peter does this morning is we are blinded by human things. Like I said we know how the whole Easter story so we do not react like Peter. We know that through the crucifixion our sins are forgiven. Peter did not know this and he did not trust Jesus enough to go along with it. And we, in the same way do not always trust what God is doing and seek to override His authority. And another name for overriding God’s authority is sin. Sin is setting our mind on human things and deciding that we know a little better than God about how things should work. We decide that things like our lack of forgiveness is a case that God did not quite envision when he was setting up the world. And so, we either ignore God or rebuke Him to justify our own sinful behavior. Of course, we all do this and will continue doing it which is why Jesus needed to die and rise again.

Since we are in the season of Lent which is a time to think about where we need to improve and get better it might be useful to think about Peter’s rebuke of Jesus and where we have such rebukes. Certainly, they may not be so grand but they are there. For myself I know I can be very good at rationalizing my sins. I tell God why I continue to do things I know are wrong through some very twisted human reasoning. I can try to will the tide to stop believing I have powers that are reserved for God. But it is folly and so in this season where we are to get right with God, we might want to work on our rebukes so that we may be His own this day and forevermore.