

Feb. 25, 2018

Second Sunday of Lent

Mark 8: 27-35

Prayer: Dear Lord, May our practices during this season of Lent please you. May you grant us some small understanding of suffering and death. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Cross Bearing

In the dining hall last week after worship, a woman asked me a question about the sermon. It had come from the gospel of Mark, so I started to respond by saying, "Well, you know, I LOVE Mark."

And she said, "Yeah, we know."

I admit to being a gospel nerd. In the study of the gospels, we always start with Mark. We believe that he was the first to write down the story of Jesus.

His account is important because it appears that Matthew and Luke used the skeleton of his story, then added and embellished for theirs.

We also think that Mark was a follower of the disciple Peter. In those early years of Peter's preaching, everyone assumed Jesus would come right back. But he didn't.

And life got very hard for the new so-called Christians who believed in him. In the 50s and 60s of the first century, the Roman Emperor Nero raged increasingly out of control. He roamed the streets killing innocent people. He had his own mother murdered. And then the great fire of Rome burned the city for six days, destroying much of it.

The citizens of Rome were turning against the mad tyrant. You've heard the phrase *Nero fiddled while Rome burned*. That was probably just a popular legend, but it indicated the people's disgust with their emperor.

So he had to find a scapegoat. And the few Christians in Rome provided it.

Nero blamed the Christians for the fire. He threw some Christians to lions in the coliseum. He set some on fire to be used as human torches. And some he crucified.

At about the same time, the Roman-Jewish War was heating up. The Zealots – Jews who believed that God would step in and deliver his people if things got bad enough – persuaded their fellow Jews to revolt against Rome.

In the year 66, the Roman Army responded by attacking the gates of Jerusalem. Incredibly, the inhabitants held out for four years. But in the year 70, Jerusalem and the temple fell.

To Jews and to Jewish-Christians, it must have looked like the end of the world. (I guess maybe to us, it would be as if the White House, the Capitol and the Supreme Court building all blew up at once.)

It was in that setting – to confused and frightened believers -- that Mark wrote his story of Jesus. His readers felt abandoned, perhaps even betrayed. And so Mark wrote a story of an abandoned and betrayed Jesus.

He seems to ask, *Why would you think your lives would be any different than his?*

His story starts off with a bang – the introduction of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, the call of the disciples, then a rather successful

journey with those disciples through Galilee. In Galilee, Jesus was wildly popular because he was feeding the crowds and healing them and casting out their demons. The Pharisees didn't like him, but Jesus was popular with the crowds.

And then in Mark's carefully crafted story, we come to the hinge. Today's passage is the point where the story shifts. It occurs in an area called Caesarea Philippi, and it's the northernmost place to which Jesus traveled.

Please turn with me to **Mark 8: 27-35**, and let's read together what happened.

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man 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. ³²He said all this quite openly.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

We read this hinge episode during Lent for a reason. Because in it, Jesus and his disciples turn their faces toward Jerusalem, where Jesus will undergo this suffering, rejection, killing and resurrection he has just announced.

This announcement is the first of three Passion predictions. In other words, this is the first time that Jesus comes out and tells his friends that he will suffer and die.

And what do they say? *No, you won't.*

Peter, who answered correctly in verse 29, that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, turned around in verse 32 and indicated he had no idea what that messiah-ship meant.

“Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”

Jesus responded sharply to Peter's misunderstanding, seeing it as no less than the temptation by Satan in the wilderness back in chapter 1. Back there we read that right after Jesus's baptism, ¹² the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan....

Now in chapter 8, the temptation is to be the earthly messiah the disciples wanted.

And so, **“turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”**

This passage is not only the literary hinge of this story. It is also the crux of this gospel.

This Messiah is not what Peter -- or anyone in his right human mind -- would want. He is something altogether different.

How different? Well, in the next section he starts talking about the most hideous means of

execution the Roman Empire had.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

It wasn't bad enough that he was predicting his own death. Now he indicates that suffering and death is the way for his followers as well. *Take up the means of your death to follow me.*

I think Mark is saying, *See, he never told you it was going to be easy or pleasant. Jesus told you it was about cross bearing.*

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This is the very core of Mark's gospel. Not a promise of heaven. Not a possibility of material blessings. Not life insurance.

Just the bare bones of a man who was God Incarnate, and his invitation to follow him through a fallen world – no matter how costly that might be.

Studying this passage was the point in seminary – first semester, first year – that I fell in love with the gospels. It was the point I started my switch from lifelong journalist to minister of this gospel.

Because I found it so nakedly honest.

Because the man who wrote this story was a devoted follower of Peter. And rather than glorify his friend, Mark wrote a story showing him *in such a bad light* that Jesus called him Satan!

Because Jesus promised neither riches nor glory, but cross bearing.

This was a powerful, unvarnished story. It was so counterintuitive, it had to be true.

Right after I came to Triune, Anne Spence, who is now our board chair, offered to print some note paper for me. She asked my favorite Bible verse to print across the top. I'm sure she was expecting something about faith or righteousness. Or maybe a proverb about a woman of worth being more precious than jewels.

But I requested Mark 8: 34: “ **‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’**” People weren't thrilled to receive notes from me.

We use those words as part of our baptism. After Kai and Whistler were baptized last week, I whispered to them, “Now take up your crosses and follow Jesus.”

The same verse is on a giant piece of art in our reception office. Our art room folks fashioned a huge piece of plywood with fabric crosses. And right through the middle run these words: “Take up your cross and follow me.”

You have to pass the cross to enter Triune.

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As we march through this Lenten season, we will read Scriptures about the last week of Jesus' life. But here in this hinge passage, Mark shows the wideness of the canyon between Jesus' understanding of where he is going and the disciples' understanding of where he is going.

And of course, the disciples are stand-ins for us. Had we been there, we wouldn't have been a bit more savvy about what was going on.

This plan to suffer and die on a cross was simply outrageous. It made no sense.

Shortly after this first passion prediction, Jesus twice more announced that he would suffer and die. And twice more the disciples didn't understand. In fact, it got worse: They responded by asking who would get the seats of glory.

Last week we talked about the last Passion prediction in which James and John asked for seats of honor beside Jesus in the kingdom. Essentially, they asked to be served rather than to serve. So Peter was not alone in his misunderstanding of this new Messiah.

Mark, probably more than any other gospel writer, depicted the disciples as clueless. They saw the healing. They heard the preaching. They experienced the casting out of demons. But they didn't have a clue what it all meant because it was so very different from anything in their experience.

It's so very different from anything in *our* experience.

In January and February, the community theater Centre Stage produced a play called "The Christians." They invited Triune to set up a table in the lobby, put an insert in their playbills and join them for the final show.

I read the script ahead of time to make sure it didn't have the music team murdering the pastor or some such. It didn't, so about 18 of us went for closing night.

The play was about a megachurch pastor who stood up in the pulpit one Sunday morning and announced that he no longer believed in a literal hell, a literal figure of Satan. And so his church would no longer believe it.

It caused a huge rift that eventually cost him his marriage and his job.

What struck me most was not the pastor's change in belief, but the assumption that everyone in the church needed to believe the same thing he did. I think it's rather healthy to have differing opinions on theological matters. The details of what hell is or isn't are not worth breaking fellowship over any more than the details of what heaven is or isn't.

In fact, the *only* thing that you must believe to be a member of this church is, *Heaven is not a golf course*. (Clearly, I've sat through one too many funerals with that metaphor.)

In this passage in Mark, the Hebrew equivalent for what Jesus calls Peter is actually *ha-satan*. It is not a proper noun, despite the way it's written in our text. And it does not mean devil. It means "the accuser" or "the adversary."

So I think what Jesus is saying to his dear friend Peter is not "You are evil incarnate." I think what he's saying is "Peter, by encouraging me not to die, you are standing between me and my Father's plan. You are adverse to my Father's plan."

So "**get behind me, Adversary.**" *I have to bear this cross.*

Every Lenten season, I worry that our church year can lead us unrealistically from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without an appreciation for all that went between regarding that cross. All the doubts. All the misgivings. All the fears.

I don't want us to leap over those crosses – Jesus' or ours.

I want us to pass them, reflect on them, take them in, pick them up.

You know, all our faith traditions deal with human suffering and death, because they are so important to us as creatures with limited life spans.

From rabbinic Jewish teachings, we hear: “ **'What shall a man do that he may live?' The (wise men) answered: 'Let him kill himself.' 'And what should a man do that he may die?' They answered: 'Let him keep himself alive.'** ” [Babylonian Talmud, 32a]

In Islam, the prophet Muhammad said, “**Die before you die.**”

In Sufism, which is a sect of Islam, the mystic Rumi said, “**Lose your life, if you seek eternity.**”

Here in Mark, we find the Christian response: “**For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.**”

I don't know if you've ever known anyone who was obsessed with death but it is a painful thing to watch. It manifests itself in irrational fears, in hypochondria, in anxiety attacks, in other things that you might not immediately recognize as a fear of death. But that's exactly what it is.

And quite simply, a fear of death steals the joy of living.

That's what all these faith traditions are trying to tell us. That which is most precious cannot be hoarded or protected. That which is most precious can only be received in gratitude and offered up to God again and again and again in the living.

The great paradox is that we are free only when we relinquish control, only when we accept that suffering and death are an inevitable, uncontrollable part of our lives. The Savior who brought us life asks that we join in his death.

By picking up those crosses and following him.

Amen.