

The Jesus We Want and the Jesus We Don't

Mark 8:27-38

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

Jesus and his disciples are on the road again.

At the climax of his Galilean ministry, he takes them on retreat to Caesarea Philippi...

the resort town at the foot of Mt. Hermon that was the center of Greek culture and emperor worship.

They follow Jesus having seen and heard extraordinary things:

healings,

exorcisms,

teachings about the kingdom of God,

a storm stilled,

a notorious demoniac restored to sanity,

a girl raised from the dead,

and more than five thousand people fed.

Jesus has walked on water—

both literally and figuratively—

restoring hope,

forgiving sins,

even healing Gentiles.

No wonder his fame has grown.

No wonder the crowds follow him.

But now it is time to get away and ask some probing questions.

And so on the way to Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks the first of the questions to his disciples,

"Who do the people say that I am?"

II

Immediately they begin answering as though they were tabulating responses from a public opinion poll—

Some say John the Baptist...
 some say Elijah...
 some say Isaiah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

Then Jesus gets right to the point:

“What about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Peter speaks up for them all and responds with his famous confession:

"You are the Christ."

He's right, of course.

And normally we would expect Jesus to say, "Well done, Peter!"

We might even expect a high-five or a fist-bump between friends.

Instead, Peter is met with rebuke.

Did you hear that part?...

Jesus *"warned them to keep it quiet, not to breathe a word of it to anyone."*

As good as Eugene Peterson's translation usually is, in this instance it doesn't go far enough.

Where the New Revised Standard Version says Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him," the Greek word literally means "to rebuke."

It is the same word used when Jesus rebuked the unclean spirits to silence them when they called him "the holy one of God" and "the Son of God."

It the same word used when Jesus rebuked and silenced the storm.

Why the rebuke?

What's going on here?

This is the first time the word "Christ" has appeared in Mark's narrative.

Jesus has no trouble with his disciples knowing who he is.

In fact, before this retreat is over, his inner circle—

Peter, James, and John—

will have a mountain-top vision of him transfigured and in conversation with Moses and Elijah.

Even then, Jesus will charge them not to tell the others.

Clearly, Jesus wants his identity kept secret,
for now is not the time for that disclosure.

It would simply be lost on the crowd.

You see, the people are expecting a conquering hero.

This Messiah is very un-heroic.

He has come to conquer more than Rome,
and do so in a way that will not be popular.

There is a cross awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem.

As far as the Jewish people are concerned,
crosses and messiahs are not compatible.

Yet it is the cross and its aftermath—
resurrection—
that will truly reveal Jesus as God's Messiah.

And so, for the first of three times in this middle section of Mark's gospel,
Jesus predicts what he must do:
go to Jerusalem...
undergo great sufferings...

be rejected by the religious establishment...
and be crucified.

He will be the victim of those expecting him
and the prey of those he has come to deliver.

This is the scandal that lies at the very heart of the Christian gospel—
a suffering, dying Messiah...
executed by the world he was sent to redeem.

To this day it is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the rest of the
world—
a suffering God subject to the fallibility of God's own creation?

It is not only scandalous, it sounds absurd!

Peter is simply the first to voice it—
to draw the distinction between the Jesus he wanted
and the Jesus he didn't want.

III

Now we can understand what happens next,
as Peter takes Jesus by the arm,
pulls him aside,
and begins to rebuke him.

Shaking off Peter's grip, Jesus steps back a pace and turns to address all of his
disciples.

He not only rebukes Peter publicly, but actually calls him God's adversary—Satan.

"Get behind me, Satan...you have no idea how God works!"

The journey to Jerusalem...
the facedown with the religious authorities...
the death on the cross...
"...all this is necessary," says Jesus.

It is no accident.

It is all a part of God's plan.

The Messiah's ministry is unfolding in accord with the Father's will.

But Peter's mind is set on human things rather than divine,
and is at odds with God.

Jesus is burning with divine fury;
he has heard this before.

The temptations he endured from Satan in the wilderness are back,
this time speaking to him through his best friend,
his most loyal follower who is simply trying to save Jesus' life.

What does it mean to live in a world so convoluted and out-of-sync with God and
God's ways,
that Satanic power can speak through our best and most loyal friends
to divert us from God's purposes for our lives?

God's purpose calls for more
and Jesus knows it.

If he saves his life, everyone will lose.

There is no way to Easter except through Good Friday,
no road to redemption without a cross,
no breaking of the kingdom into human life
without the scandal of his self-denial.

That is what Peter doesn't understand.

Peter, like the rest of us, wants the kingdom without a collision.

He wants to be rescued without a fight.

He wants to be redeemed without it costing anything.

No wonder Jesus says, "*Get behind me, Satan!*"

Stunned, stung and embarrassed, Peter listens as Jesus tells all of them something equally scandalous—
 the cost of following him.

If they are to follow him on the way,
 they must deny themselves,
 and take up their cross and follow Jesus.

They, and we, must lay aside the image of the Jesus we think we want,
 to follow in the footsteps of the Jesus we don't want.

The roadshow is over.

Now they are on the way to Jerusalem,
 where things are going to get ugly.

Following Jesus can mean the same kind of suffering, rejection and death,
 but it also includes a tomb whose other side is resurrection—
 a word they do not yet understand.

Following Jesus means self-denial—
 not self hatred!—
 but denying that "grasping self" that always wants to be first,
 that believes if we grasp long enough—
 achieve, gather or possess enough—
 we will find life.

IV

The disciples listen to all this in stunned silence.

So should we.

For Jesus is talking to us, as well.

He is addressing any who would follow him on the way.

It is not enough to talk the talk.

Discipleship is walking the walk.

Attempts to save our lives will actually be a means of losing them.

But those of us who lose our lives for his sake and for the sake of the gospel,
will save them.

A small plane with five passengers on it had an engine malfunction and was going down. The pilot came out of the cockpit with a parachute pack strapped on his back and addressed the group:

"Folks, there is bad news, and there is good news. The bad news is that the plane's going down, and there's nothing more I can do. The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the wall back there. The bad news is that there are four of them and five of you. But good luck. Thank you for choosing our airline, and we hope you have a good evening, wherever your final destination may be."

He gave the group a thumbs-up and was out the door.

A woman leaped up from her seat. "I'm one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast. My patients depend on me." She grabbed a pack, strapped it on her back, and leaped out.

A man stood up. "I am a partner in a large law practice, and I bring in most of our business. The practice would fail without me." He grabbed a pack, strapped it on his back, and leaped out.

Another man stood up and said, "I am arguably the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I won't even tell you what it is. But surely you understand that I must have a parachute." He grabbed a bundle and leaped out.

That left only two people on the plane, a middle-aged pastor and a teenage boy.

"Son," said the pastor, "you take the last parachute. You're young; you have your whole life ahead of you. God bless you and safe landing."

The teenager grinned at the older man. "Thanks, pastor, but there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my backpack."

We are all in midair clinging to something.

our looks,
 our youthfulness,
 the neighborhood we live in,
 the prestige of our job
 or how well our children or our grandchildren
 are doing in school, sports, life.

Like Peter, we cling to our image of who we want Jesus to be.

Both of our arms are occupied clinging to our lives—
 and we don't have an arm free to reach out to anyone else.

I'm glad A. E. Houseman appreciated the first half of Jesus' saying, but there is a second half as well:

"...those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."

V

Listen carefully:

this is not about altruistic self-sacrifice for its own noble sake,
 nor for the sake of family or nation.

Nor is cross-bearing about accepting or putting up with unforeseen calamity or hardship—

the unpredictable tragedies that come to us in life,
 that we are too often tempted to call
 "a cross we have to bear."

Cross-bearing is about intentional discipleship—
 strategies and actions in this world that can create opposition because we are
 remaining loyal to Jesus and his gospel.

So here's the question:

Where's the profit in gaining the world and forfeiting your life in the process?

The gospel is not simply one of a number of acceptable life alternatives,
 and certainly not some self-help scheme to success,
 a gospel of prosperity.

This is about life lived in all of its parts,
 dying to ourselves in order to follow Jesus on the way,
 even when that way puts us on a collision course with this world
 and its false messiahs,
 confrontations that can result in crucifixions—
 whether literal or metaphorical.

To make the point crystal clear, Jesus asks another probing question:

"What can you give in return for your life?"

The answer, of course, is "only your life."

But despite our clinging, grasping ways that think that we can preserve our *psyche*,
 our *nephesh*, our life force by holding on as tightly as we can,
 life can't be bought.

That continues to be obscured in this out-of-sync, bottom line dominated world.

For the world, then and now, is both adulterous and sinful.

Adulterous here, as in most cases in the Bible, is less a reference to sexual activity
 than it is a metaphor for idolatry—
 placing our ultimate trust in things—
 usually monetary—
 rather than God.

Such idolatry not only separates us from God,
 it usually kills us in the process.

We say we want Jesus, but do we really want the burden Jesus calls us to take on...
 the burden he himself carried?

VI

Finally, Jesus asks what, for us, is probably the most troubling question of all in
 this lesson:

*Are we ashamed of him and his words in this adulterous and sinful
 generation?*

Is our attachment to the world, its systems and its ways—
the whole system of life and privilege that you and I know—
so strong that we are embarrassed to say,
"That's not Jesus' way; I can't do that."

One does not need to be a raving, right-wing religious fanatic to say,

"I belong to Jesus.

I'm following him;

I'm trying to serve him rather than the other would-be saviors in the world.

I have to listen to him.

*I'm trying to live in his kingdom rather than the ones the world and its
Tempter are trying to set up around me."*

That is what Jesus is asking of you and me.

We don't always want that Jesus.

But that Jesus is the only one who can truly save us from ourselves.

Amen.

Sources:

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