

Mark 8:27-38

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

²⁷Jesus 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.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹Then 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."

³⁴He 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." ^{9:1}And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

A Little Knowledge, a Dangerous Thing

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Text: *Mark 8:27-38*

Who do you say that I am? With these words Jesus puts his disciples on the line. He has already asked, “Who do others say that I am?” The populous has plausible ideas about who Jesus is. Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others say one of the prophets. Not bad guesses. There is a certain irony that King Herod comes the closest in a way. He’s the one who thinks Jesus is John the Baptist returned from the dead. Herod knows enough to be frightened of Jesus. Herod thinks he’s John come back to haunt him, and he may not be far wrong.

But Jesus lets all he answers of who others say he is fall to the ground like autumn leaves. He wants to know what his disciples think. Who do you say that I am?

The moment is pivotal, crucial. Half way through the Gospel of Mark Jesus puts the disciples on the line. Some of you are good at quick answers to questions. Christine Parsons even appeared on Jeopardy. But abrupt questions always immobilize me. The scene I conjure up in my mind is Jesus standing before the disciples, they win or lose everything by the answer, the category is identity – Who do you say that I am? You have five seconds to answer. Go.

I would not have been Peter. I would have been John or Andrew or Phillip, trying to slide behind one of the others unnoticed, hoping someone could think straight. And I would have been relieved when Peter, good old reliable Peter, good old quick thinking Peter, I would have been grateful when Peter shouted out, “You are the Messiah.”

Now, remember, we know that the Gospel of Mark is about the Messiah. We know the story from beginning to end. But here, at the halfway point of the Gospel, not one person has yet identified Jesus as the Messiah. This wasn’t an open book test, or even a quiz over covered material. Peter’s answer is remarkable, then. No wonder he is almost always at the top of the list of disciples. If I had been there, hiding behind one of the others, I would have thought, “Wow, that’s right.” I would have thought to myself, “I never would have thought of it, but that’s right. It’s absolutely right.”

Peter gets it dead on. Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus’ response, though, is curious. He sternly ordered them, the Greek actually says he rebuked them, he rebuked them to tell no one. Now this isn’t the only time that Jesus tells people to keep things secret. Indeed, the Gospel of Mark is sometimes called the Secret Gospel. When he exorcizes demons, when he heals people, when he works miracles, Jesus says, “Don’t tell anyone about this.” Of course, no one listens to him. They tell everybody they run into. And soon Jesus attracts a throng wherever he goes.

Many thinkers over the ages have pondered about why Jesus kept commanding people not to tell others about his miracles, or in this case about his identity. Did Jesus want to avoid crowds? Did he want to wait until he was raised before people started following him? Today most readers of the Gospel recognize that Jesus wanted to prevent being known for the partial truth. He didn’t want to be known simply as a miracle worker, or a healer, or even, it turns out,

as the Messiah.

Jewish texts of the time don't necessarily imagine a Messiah coming on the wheels of thunder to save God's people. Some of the most radical texts may use that imagery. But for the most part, the texts of the day imagine a king, a human king appointed by God, who will one day restore Israel and her people.

But that is not the kind of Messiah Jesus is. Peter gets it right, at least partially; Jesus is the Messiah. But Jesus wants to be sure that the partial truth doesn't get substituted for the whole truth. So Jesus says, Jesus rebukes them all, "not to tell anyone about him" – not to tell anyone because they don't yet have it right.

Now, we don't have to wait long before we find out what Jesus' concern is. We don't have to wait very long to see what part of the truth it is that Peter doesn't see. In the very next scene, here at the beginning of the central section of Mark's Gospel Jesus gives us the first of three predictions of his suffering and death. He must "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days, be raised again."

Peter, Peter who just has said out loud that the man before him is the Messiah is stunned. So contrary to what Peter meant when he called Jesus the Messiah, so contrary to what Peter meant is Jesus' prediction of his own suffering that Peter believes the master has gone mad. Peter calls him aside. Peter takes Jesus aside so as not to embarrass the teacher. We don't know Peter's exact words. We know he rebuked Jesus, which is pretty strong language. I don't know the exact words, but if I were writing the screenplay, it would go something like this: Good God, man, do you understand what you have just said? If you are the Messiah, you are supposed to be a leader. You are supposed to be the solution to our problems. Suffering and execution, these are signs of powerlessness and failure. You are powerful. You are a success. You heal the sick. You chase demons away. You perform miracles. Look, if you need a little rest, or maybe a little Prozac, that's alright. But you just can't go around saying crazy things about betrayal, suffering and death. You are our hope and salvation. Peter knows more than many. He does know that Jesus is the Messiah. But he is living proof that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

It is almost comic. We're so used to Peter's foolishness, his failure to grasp the point, that we may miss the fact that today we who follow Jesus are susceptible to the same mistakes. PHEME PERKINS writing in *The New Interpreter's Bible* says, "Despite everything the Bible tells us about the suffering of truly righteous people, Christians frequently think that if we pray enough, God will remove all the trials from our lives. A family with a drug-addicted teenager might be pressured to 'pray harder and the kid will come around.'¹" PERKINS calls us a "pain-killer culture."² We and Peter hope for a simpler, less painful existence.

And why not? Jesus instead proclaims a Gospel of suffering and rejection. And why? These questions, why? and why not? Force us headlong into the questions with which every

¹PHEME PERKINS, "The Gospel of Mark," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume VIII, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville, Abington Press, 1995), 626

²*Ibid.*, 625

great religion, every culture, and every individual struggles. How do we make sense of pain and suffering?

It is an understatement to say that a clear and indisputable answer to that question is elusive. And I will not presume to give the final word on this vexing subject. Indeed, the clearest answers have proven the most unsatisfactory. But I do believe that we can understand some important aspects of the problem. I do believe that we can understand enough about pain and suffering to make an enormous difference in how we engage existence. In the time that remains this morning I would like to explore just two of them.

As I have said, the question of pain and suffering cannot easily be wrapped into a neat bundle. Peter wants the clear and neat answer that with God there is no suffering, no pain. Now, I don't know why the universe isn't organized that way, but it isn't. The great book of Job long ago settled the matter. Innocent people suffer. Pain is not punishment.

Nonetheless, the belief that it is persists. How many times have I been asked, what did I do to deserve this? Why me? How many times have I asked the question myself? And how many times have we explained the sad plight of another person or family or group of people, how many times have we explained the plight by blaming them. If that family with the drug-addicted teenager but prayed better, or were better Christians, their son would not be on drugs. If the man diagnosed with cancer were a true believer, God would remove his affliction. If the poor had ambition and self-respect, their problems would disappear. If only I could get right with God, my crippling illness would vanish. Oh, how natural it is to think that the grief that befalls us is in some way recompense for our sin and failure.

But look what happens when we do that. At the moment in human existence when we face the greatest trials, at the moment the storm clouds surround us and the waves beat high, at the moment we are our weakest and most vulnerable, our natural instinct is to heap more burning coals on our heads.

I take it that at least a part of what Jesus' life and death and resurrection are meant to say to us is that at that crucial moment in human existence when the trials are their most severe, we can depend on God to be close by, embracing us, supporting us, loving us, believing in us, and hoping for us. And that is quite a different picture from the one created by Jesus pointing an accusing finger at us, by Jesus kicking us when we are down. In the most theological sense, Jesus' obedience in human incarnation extends to death on a cross, and salvation comes when he points his finger at that rude instrument of terror, points his finger at the very instrument of his torture, points his finger there instead of at you and me, and declares to the cross, "I, not you, get the last word." Here we find salvation not so much because Jesus died for our sins but because Jesus is our forerunner, as Hebrews says, "having entered on our behalf," having shown us the way.

Jesus' incarnation means that he walks in solidarity with us, and in a world where pain and suffering and disappointment often accompany us, too, there can hardly be better news.

I promised to explore two observations about pain and suffering that can make a difference in our lives. And the second is in a sense quite different from the first, though it springs from the same source.

Related to the human inclination to blame suffering on the victim is the human desire to avoid pain at any cost, thus Perkins' observation that we are a "pain-killer culture." And what that means is that many people who try to make a difference in the world, who try to shake

things up are, in fact, going to be threatened, harmed or even assassinated. The main reason that Jesus was crucified was that he upset too many people in places of power. He called them on their hypocrisy. He contradicted their false piety. He told them that the lowly widow, and the unclean tax collector, and the sick and lame were more righteous than they were.

The world we live in can be manipulative and mean-spirited, and very often, if we choose to do what is worthwhile, we must be willing to suffer for it. For some people the price is ultimate. Jesus and Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Theresa and the Dalai Lama come easily to mind. Three of the five paid with their lives; all five gave it all they had, and the Dalai Lama still does. There is no doubt that these are inspirational figures. Who can but admire their courage and commitment?

I am sometimes asked, Do I have to make such sacrifices as these people do to be a true Christian? And the answer is a resounding no. Most of us will live lives neither of such fame nor of such single-mindedness. But our path is no less difficult or meaningful. It may be more. Fred Craddock likens the comparison to having a thousand dollars of commitment. Some people take the thousand dollars and lay it on the table and say, "There, I have given my all." And that is laudable, to be sure. But most of us are called to spend our commitment 25¢ or 50 ¢ at a time, thousands of times over our lives.

And this is no trivial or easy matter. Decisions at work when questions of morality are at stake, decisions in family life, decisions filing your taxes, to tell the truth or lie when lying is easier, a political stance that pits fairness against self-interest, refusing to take the bait when you are treated unfairly by a former spouse, maybe windmills in your back yard if you have a five million dollar home on Nantucket, or a shelter in your back yard if you live in Central Square – these and a hundred other decisions and positions every day will ask sacrifices and often painful sacrifices of you. Honorable and moral living, standing for what is right, they very often cut against our self-interest. And when you rock the boat, those inside it may strike out, hoping to cause you pain and suffering.

Doing what is right, doing what is worthwhile, most often carries a price tag. Peter wanted it to carry fringe benefits. Life, for reasons beyond my knowledge, is painful and difficult. Peter wanted life to be a bowl of cherries. Jesus offered himself both as guide and loving companion instead. Peter's impulses are surely understandable. I certainly have shared them. But in the end, Peter's impulses get him just far enough to get into a kettle of trouble.

Life with Jesus is not easy. But it is rewarding beyond measure, and in it we are never alone. Amen.