

February 28th, 2021

Mark 8:31-38 “It Is What It Is”

Last week we kicked off our Lenten season with Mark’s *very* brief account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. It made sense to start there because that was the test to see if Jesus was ready to launch his public ministry. In case you weren’t here last week, Jesus passed the test with flying colors. This week we jump ahead six chapters to another big milestone in Jesus’ ministry, but this one seems sort of grim comparatively speaking. Between Mark 2 and this first part of chapter 8, we’ve got all these stories about Jesus’ miracles, healings, feedings, and teaching his followers about what God’s reign will look like. There were *some* conflicts for sure, but nothing too terribly serious. Then we hit verse 27. It *seems* to start out on a high note with Jesus asking his disciples about who people say he is. A lot of us have heard this story before. Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do *people* say that I am?” They say, “John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the other Prophets.” Jesus says, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter says, “You are the Messiah.” Now here’s where Mark is different than Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Messiah” and then Jesus heaps praises on Peter for answering the way he did. “Good job Peter! You have spoken correctly. I’m going to call you ‘Rocky’ because you’ll be the solid foundation of my church!” But Mark and Luke aren’t as gracious to Peter. Especially Mark. Peter makes his great confession - “You are the Messiah.” Then Jesus *sternly* tells Peter and the other disciples to be quiet and keep it to themselves.

And then we shift over to verse 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.” Which then leads to Peter rebuking Jesus, then Jesus calls Peter a “satan” and tells the people who’ve gathered there that anyone who wants to follow him has to deny themselves and take up a cross. And sure enough, from here on, the tone of the story gets sadder and gloomier as he starts his journey toward Jerusalem and to the cross

that he eventually carried to his own crucifixion. Welcome to week two of Lenten season. Six more Sundays to go. Okay, so what I *don't* want to do, especially after the year we've had, is to have Lenten season be all about dwelling in shame and focusing on a gloomy, joyless death march to the cross. What I do want to do during our Lenten journey is to focus on what it takes to be a disciple. But in order to do this, we have to reflect and be honest about the sacrifice that's involved. That means we can't ignore the pain and struggle that's present in these texts. If we do, then we'd be like Peter who tries to shut Jesus down when Jesus said, "I'm going to the cross." "No Jesus! Don't say that!" That's when Jesus shuts him down and calls him a "satan." I don't want to be a satan so let's just approach Lent honestly this year.

Today's gospel text starts in a city called Caesarea Philippi which is about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. I tell you this because *where* this story takes place is a big deal, but we miss out on that because we're reeling from the whiplash we feel when Peter gets chewed out by Jesus right after he gets praised for recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. First of all, let's look at the name of this town: Caesarea Philippi. Literally "Philip's Caesarea." Who was this Philip who bears the city's namesake? He is Herod Phillip II, one of the sons of King Herod the Great who, if you don't recognize the name, was the villain in the Gospel of Matthew's Christmas story. Philip was part of this Herodian Dynasty from about 4 BCE to 34 CE which was almost exactly the time that Jesus was alive on this earth. Remember, the Herodians were the Jewish "client kings" that the Romans set up in Judea to keep the general Jewish population from rebelling. So, this city of Caesarea Philippi, where our scripture takes place today, was literally a place dedicated in name and purpose to the intersection of the reigns of Caesar and Herod. The relationship between the Caesars and the Herodians was always tenuous at best. There was a lot of animosity there, and so many times these two powers clashed. But the one thing they could agree on was that Jesus was a threat. And right here in the Gospel of Mark in this place where the Roman way intersected with the Jewish way, we've got this little passage about Jesus and Peter.

Immediately after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus told his followers that his path would lead to suffering, rejection, and death at the combined hands of Caesar and Herod.

So, where and what is *our* lesson here today in this passage? How does this relate to *our* Lenten journey here in Chico, California on the 49th Sunday of worshipping outside the physical space of this sanctuary? Why is Jesus speaking so harshly here right after a series of positive and uplifting events? There are *so* many directions we can go with this scripture, but what I want to do this morning is focus on what “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” might mean as a condition to be a disciple of Christ.

When we hear the word “cross” we tend to immediately think of *the* cross ... the one that Jesus was crucified on. But there were *many* crosses in the ancient world. Crucifixion wasn’t new. It was not invented by the Romans. For centuries crucifixion was used by rulers of ancient empires to show what happens to rebels. The Assyrians and Babylonians used it. Then the Persians borrowed the idea. Alexander the Great used it when he was building his empire in the Mediterranean region. Rome got the idea from the Phoenicians in the 3rd Century BC. And as crass as this sounds, Rome perfected the art of crucifixion and so the very image of the cross became this symbol of how mercilessly they treated dissidents and enemies of the Empire. So why would Jesus tell both his disciples and the crowd gathered there that anyone who wishes to follow him had to deny themselves and “take up their cross?”

Chet Myers wrote a book 30 years ago called *Binding the Strong Man* about how he believes the Gospel of Mark is a manifesto for radical discipleship. In fact, he believes that the phrase, “Deny yourself and take up your cross” may have been a rallying cry or a slogan used by the Jewish rebels who opposed the Roman occupation of their lands. Matthew and Luke used this phrase in their gospels too. But what does it *mean* to deny yourself and take up your cross? What does it mean to lose your life in order to gain it? Does it mean that following Jesus is

some kind of suicide mission? I don't believe so. I think it has more to do with Jesus telling his disciples that his life means more than just feeding a crowd of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. It means more than calming storms. It means more than healing people and telling stories about seeds and farming. In other words, it's more than just receiving, it's about investing your life into *living* the good news rather than just *hearing* the good news. How *much* of your life do you need to invest? Enough where the fear and threat of death no longer drives you to conformity. Conformity to what? To the dominant order's insistence that you toe the line and say, "Caesar is Lord" instead of "Jesus is Lord." To follow Jesus means to be uncompromising when it comes to resisting evil, just as we saw last week when Jesus resisted evil in the wilderness. For Jesus' followers, it means standing up to and resisting the powers-that-be who would persecute you in order to get you to reject God's ways in favor of the imperial way. *That's* radical discipleship.

See? We're not on a doom and gloom death march here. Lent can be exciting! It just has to pull us out of the "comfortable Christianity zone." And that's what this morning's gospel lesson is meant to be: A wake-up call to recognize that whenever the powers that be try to intimidate us with the threat of their cross, we can resist and contribute to shattering that power's reign of death in history. To the point where we use that very same cross as a symbol of hope! Wow! Jesus invites us to be liberated from that fear by taking up our crosses and following him. This isn't an invitation to martyrdom for Jesus' disciples. And neither is it an invitation to passivity. It's the intentional liberation and the freedom to say, "This power that the empires of the world wield is not a power over me." The good news is that the power of the state ... the power of the empires of the world has been stripped. The power that the empires of the world try to exercise over the most vulnerable among us is no longer a power *over* us because we are disciples of the one who Peter correctly recognized as the "The Messiah" or "The Christ." The Son of the Living God whom we serve. Blessing, glory, and honor be to the one that was and is and is to come.