

“Learning Who God Is”
Mark 8: 31-38
March 4, 2012- 2nd Sunday in Lent
CCUMC
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Before the reading of scripture

(intro to sermon series) This text today is the first of three predictions of Jesus’ suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection in the gospel of Mark. In each prediction, the disciples fail to understand who Jesus really is, and Jesus then offers teaching on true discipleship (see also 9: 31-37, 10: 32-45). Mark offers these predictions and the failings of the disciples as a way of showing the incongruity between our human expectations and what it really means to follow Jesus.¹

I. Who is this Messiah?

Peter has just had a lightbulb moment. Like the rest of the disciples in the gospel of Mark, Peter remains largely clueless. He drops his nets and his fishing livelihood and follows this charismatic man from Nazareth. He witnesses Jesus’ healings, sees him walk on water, and watches Jesus feed thousands with just a little crust of bread. Peter even gets to see Jesus turn dazzling white on a mountaintop. Yet we must journey with Peter, Jesus, and the rest of the disciples more than halfway through the book for Mark before he gets who this guy whom he is following really is.

Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Lightbulb goes off in Peter’s head.

Peter answers, “You are the Messiah.”

Bingo. Right answer. Jesus is the Messiah, or *Christos* in Greek—“the anointed one.” On this point, Jesus and Peter agree. However, their expectations of what “Messiah” means are drastically different.

¹ Marilyn Salmon, workingpreacher.com Accessed on Feb. 27, 2012

A. Peter's Expectation of the Messiah

Peter, as a faithful Jew, thinks that the Messiah is the one who comes to save the Hebrew people from their experience of occupation and domination by the Greeks and then the Romans. The Messiah is to be a brilliant leader in a role of glory and renown. The Messiah would restore the lost fortunes of Israel and save the people. Up until now, what Peter has experienced with Jesus would indicate that God's reign is coming. Jesus has cast out demons, healed the sick, and calmed the seas. Surely, Peter thinks, more greatness for all the Jews is coming through this man. Peter daydreams for a moment in silence (Jesus, after all, has just told him to be quiet) He muses about what a smart decision he made to drop his nets and follow this man destined for greatness—which meant Peter's destiny looks pretty great, too.

Until Jesus brings him back to earth with a thud. Jesus says he is to undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Jesus understands his Messiahship not as that of a glorious political leader but as one who will suffer death upon a gruesome cross. Jesus sees that God's reign comes through a crucified Messiah who suffers in order that Israel might be redeemed.

Peter doesn't want this kind of Messiah. A weak and murdered Messiah? A glorious leader who dies the absurd death of a criminal? No, this isn't the God Peter wants to follow. No sir. This isn't what Peter wants to learn about God's identity.² Surely Jesus is possessed with a demon to say stuff like this. Peter takes him aside with his strong, brawny fisherman arms and tries to shake some sense into his leader. He shouts angrily in order to drive out

² Stanley Harakas, *The Christian Century* Feb. 5-12 1997.

whatever craziness possesses Jesus. Peter tries to make him be the God that he wants and expects—a Messiah of miracles and power.

B. Our Expectation of the Messiah

We can't really blame Peter. Who could really imagine that the God of all heaven and earth would redeem us by suffering? Who would have thought that God's strength would be most fully revealed in weakness?³ Don't we sometimes really want a knight on a white horse. . . or superman. . . or even a fairy godmother? Don't we want a God who can protect us, give us health and happiness? Don't we sometimes wonder who this God is who allows hurricanes to sweep in with devastation? Who allows children to die of starvation? Who allows us to suffer? Don't you sometimes wonder who this God is when you get a diagnosis of cancer, when your beloved child wanders off with demons, or when one dear to you dies painfully, or when life just hurts and hurts and hurts? Don't you ever want to do what Peter did, and take Jesus aside and just shake him? Don't you ever think, "where's the Messiah that I want, to come and redeem me out of this struggle in my life? Where's the Messiah of miracles and power? Where is the immortal, invincible God who can shield me from my own vulnerability? Where's the God I want and who is this God that I worship?"

II. This Messiah Is. . . One who suffers, dies, and rises

And then Jesus steps out in front of us. In our scripture today, the cross already casts its shadow across his brow and the crown of thorns begins to hover about his head. Jesus teaches Peter, his disciples, and us that who God really is may not be the God we want, but the God we desperately need. This God chooses to undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed not out of some terrible masochism, but out of deepest love. This work of salvation for us manifests the infinite love

³ David Lose, workingpreacher.com. Accessed on Feb. 27, 2012.

of the Father and the Son—a salvific love that offers liberation to us only through the path of suffering.⁴ Many atonement theories exist to explain theologically how exactly Jesus’s death on the cross saves us, from St. Augustine’s *Christus Victor* to Anselm’s *Deus Homo* to Peter Abelard’s “divine love”, but the main point is that Jesus suffers to free us from sin and offer eternal life. In Christ’s work as the Messiah, which he describes in our passage today, Christ drew himself completely into the world of human suffering. This God in Christ moves right on into our vulnerability, our suffering, and our death because this Messiah fully dwells in our humanity. This God is one who dwells with those in hurricanes, of children who have no food, of people with illness. As the theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer says “only the suffering God can truly help us.”

Who is this God, then, whom Peter wanted to shake and who appears so weak when what we so desperately want is strength and power? This God in Christ, in the Messiah, is one who gains the power of the resurrection through the weakness of the cross. In his very weakness there is strength—a paradox that the apostle Paul often lifts up (when I am weak, then I am strong). A suffering Christ who fully understands our hurts, our disappointments, our aches is then able to catch up our sufferings up in the salvific power of the resurrection.

IV. Who We are in the Messiah

So if Jesus teaches us that who God is in this scripture is one who suffers, dies, and rises, then who are we in this Messiah? We are ones whose very weaknesses can be claimed by God as a source for divine power. To this the apostle Paul writes in Romans “we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” (Romans 5: 3-5). In the words of Pope John Paul II, the more a suffering individual

⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* 11 February 1984 www.vatican.va.

unleashes hope, and believes that suffering will not get the best of her, the more she claims her dignity and witnesses to the love of God in Christ.⁵ Through the redemptive suffering of Christ our very woundedness can become a site of healing. We are ones whose brokenness can be places where we sense, meet and are enveloped most fully in God's love. We are the ones whose vulnerability can become the place of witnessing Christ's other vulnerable ones around us. We are the ones who by our own sufferings, redeemed by Christ's love, can be more loving to others. Theologian Howard Thurman writes that "the presence of the suffering Christ. . . makes it possible through God's fellowship to abide their own suffering of whatever character."⁶

I will offer the example of our own Dorothy Doyle, who I'm going to talk about even though she's not here. Over the past couple of weeks she has and continues to endure through enormous suffering. Yet whenever I go to visit her, she just glows with love, with suffering transformed into love. She imparts a gift to me. Thurman describes this phenomenon: "We see people as profoundly changed by their suffering. Into their faces has come a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; such people look upon life with quiet eyes. Openings are made in a life by suffering that are not made in any other way."⁷ Such is the strange mystery of our human suffering when we offer it up to be transformed through the redemptive suffering of Christ.

So to Peter and the rest of us disciples, when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" what do we respond? The Messiah. The Messiah who underwent great suffering, was rejected by the chief priests and scribes, was killed, and after three days, rose again. The Messiah who understands us, who suffers with us, and who redeems that very suffering.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*.

⁶ Howard Thurman, "Suffering," in *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering* ed. Anthony Pinn (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002),

⁷ *Ibid*, 238.

The Messiah who in his very weakness is strong, who in his crucifixion is resurrection, who in his love is redemption. This is a God who teaches that suffering takes us deep, deep into the heart of love. This is a God who holds out open hands and says, “I am with you. I am holding you. I know you are hurting. I know your sufferings. I love you deeply.” Amen

Transition to Communion

This God is one who meets us in our own brokenness in body, mind, and spirit--- because this God has been broken for us. In this meal we meet the broken Christ, the suffering Christ, who feeds us with grace and mercy, who sustains us with the bread of heaven, so that we might continue to endure triumphantly in this life.