

Mark 8:31-38

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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But 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.

35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

38 Those 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.”

## DISAPPOINTED WITH JESUS

Peter was deeply disappointed with Jesus. You might even say that Peter was even ashamed of Jesus.

And we know that before this season of Lent is over, Peter will even deny knowing Jesus.

You see Jesus was just not the Messiah that Peter wanted him to be. And I suspect that Jesus is sometimes not the Messiah that we would want him to be either.

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered for all the disciples when he said, “You are the Messiah.”

## THE MESSIAH?

The first seven chapters of Mark have been leading us to this point. Jesus said what only God could say. Jesus did what only God can do. People were all asking the same questions.

Who is this guy? How can he heal the sick and still the storm? What gives him the right to forgive sins and talk with such authority about the kingdom of God? Could he be God’s Son? Could he be the Messiah?

Peter finally gets up the nerve to say it out loud. You are the Messiah. You are the one for whom we’ve been waiting.

Finally, the secret is out in the open. Finally, they can say what they have been bursting at the seams to shout from the mountaintops.

And what does Jesus say to Peter in Mark's gospel? Does he say good job for having such insight and understanding? Does this mark the beginning of the revolution?

No, Jesus does not say what they expect. Instead, Jesus "sternly" warns to not to say a word about this. The Greek word is a very strong word; it's a word that usually means rebuke.

So, you see that Mark's portrayal of this event is quite different from the other gospels. Jesus does not say that Peter is a rock upon which the church will be built. Instead, Peter and the other disciples are told to keep quiet in no uncertain terms.

That must have been very disappointing.

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT

But, it gets worse.

Jesus wants the disciples to keep his identity as Messiah quiet, but he speaks quite openly about the cross that the Messiah must bear. Did you catch that in our lesson?

Jesus began to teach so that all can hear that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the political and religious leaders, suffer death, and then on the third day rise again.

I don't think the disciples even heard that last part about rising again. And if they did they probably didn't understand what it meant. After all the resurrection was a totally unique, one of a kind event. It would be hard for anyone to conceive of such a thing, much less believe in it.

But, they did understand what Jesus was saying about suffering. They did understand the cross.

Part of our problem with this passage is that we don't have a realistic understanding of the cross. For us the cross is piece of jewelry or a beautiful sign of faith that we put in our sanctuary.

But, in Jesus' day a cross was a means of execution. Someone once said that when we wear crosses around our necks it is as if we were wearing miniature gold electric chairs.

I don't recommend that anyone watch Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* more than once. The very young should avoid this movie all together, and there are probably many others who would do well not to see this movie.

It's very gruesome and like all movies it distorts the message somewhat for dramatic effect. But I do think that it might be helpful for some of us to watch it once, just to see a fairly accurate portrayal of the barbarity of this practice.

This form of execution by torture was designed to frighten anyone who would dare to take up arms against the Romans. Brave people might not be afraid of dying in the service of their country. They might even be willing to be martyrs.

But only a fool would dare to die on the cross, or at least that's what the Romans thought. And that's what the disciples thought as well.

No one could be a Messiah and submit to such suffering. No one could lead their country to victory and be treated in such a way. And to talk openly about such a thing was sheer madness.

### REBUKED

No wonder Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. What Jesus was saying could prove to be dangerous not only for Jesus but also for those who would follow him.

How many leaders today talk about suffering and self-denial as a part of their campaign speech? I haven't heard that from Democrats or Republicans. And if a candidate ever did say that their campaign manager would take them aside and rebuke them. He would say,

"If you want to win, you've got to be more positive. You've got to tell the people what they want to hear."

But, Jesus was not telling the people what they wanted to hear. And Peter was deeply disappointed in Jesus, so Peter rebuked Jesus.

And then Jesus rebuked Peter. Actually, Jesus did quite a bit more than rebuke Peter. He turned his back on Peter and toward the disciples and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

### IN DEFENSE OF PETER

I know you're not supposed to criticize Jesus, but that was harsh. Yes, Peter didn't know what he was talking about. He didn't see the big picture. But, did Jesus have to call him Satan? Why couldn't Peter be disappointed with the way things were unfolding?

And so today I want to say just a few words in defense of Peter. Peter and many other people of faith have expressed disappointment with God. I know. Some of you think that if you express disappoint or doubt in what God is doing that you are by definition a person who does not have faith.

And even if you are willing to express your disappointment with God, even if you think that kind of honesty is consistent with faith, it still makes you feel a bit unseemly, a bit tainted.

I think we shouldn't go overboard in our criticism of Peter. Yes, he was clueless. Yes, he often talked when he should have been silent. We know what that's like. Many of us are like that. But a life of faith is not solely described by one moment of failure.

If you would describe most people's journey to faith in terms of a graph, it wouldn't be a straight line going straight to heaven. It would be a graph that would have many peaks and valleys. The route to faith would be filled with twists and turns.

## DOUBT AND FAITH

And part of the journey would be expressing your doubts.

Some people think that faith is the opposite of doubt. In some cases that's true. But, sometimes God uses our disappointments, our doubt as a way of moving us forward. As one author put it, "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith that keep it awake and moving."

I would remind you that though Peter doubted Jesus on several occasions; he still kept following him. When Jesus said that Peter was Satan, it wasn't a final judgment, but a way to lead him and others on a better path.

Often when life and God's seeming inaction disappointed the Psalmists, they did not hesitate to name their complaints, disappointments and doubts. In fact being honest to God seemed to play an important role in the development of their faith.

Faith develops in the struggles of life. Faith and doubt often live side by side.

In Matthew's gospel even Jesus seems to think that God has left him. On the cross Jesus, borrowing the words of one of those powerful Psalms of lament cries aloud his own great disappointment and despair when he cried, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

This doubt does not have the last word, not with Jesus nor with us. But, it is important to remember that doubt does belong in the story of faith. Rebuke and rejection are a part of the story. Indeed, Jesus said as much in our lesson for today.

But, the real test is how we interpret those doubts and those rebukes. Peter desperately wants to protect Jesus. That is why Peter rebukes Jesus. And when Jesus rebukes Peter, I'm sure Peter was a bit angry, a bit confused, maybe he felt embarrassed that Jesus would say such a thing in front of the others. But, I still think that disappointment is still the dominant emotion for Peter.

I wonder. Are some of you disappointed with God? Would you like to take God aside and say, “What are you thinking? Why did you let this happen to me? Where are you in all this God?”

Of course you’ve been disappointed with God. But, you’re afraid to say what you really think. And if you have ever worked up the nerve to say what you really think, someone probably told you to keep quiet, that you were being unfaithful, that it was wrong to doubt God. They may have even said that you were doing the work of Satan.

You know why they said that don’t you?

It was because they had their own doubts, and your expression of disappointment and doubt stirred up something in them. It made them afraid.

### TEMPTATION

Peter may have played a cameo role as Satan in this passage. But, he played the role of Satan because his actions actually tempted Jesus to deny the necessity of the cross.

Even though Jesus spoke openly about the way of the cross, he also struggled with the horrible implications all the way to Jerusalem. You can see this in the Garden of Gethsemane when he literally sweat drops of blood and asked his heavenly Father if there was any other way to get the job done.

But, there was no other way and Jesus finally accepted the difficult sacrifice he would have to make.

The way of faith is always a struggle. Peter may have been mistaken about what God was doing in Jesus. He surely had more to learn about the God he worshipped and the Messiah he followed.

But, we can understand his instincts. Why should God’s Son suffer in such a way? It didn’t seem fair. It didn’t seem godly.

After all these years we have the same struggle.

Who would believe that the God of heaven and earth would redeem the world in this way?

How could a death on a cross, a cross reserved for the worst criminals bring eternal salvation? Who would predict that God’s strength would be revealed in such apparent weakness?

It is unthinkable.

And so I would say to those whose beloved partner is sick unto death, I would say to those whose prized relationship has crumbled, I would say to those who have lost their dream job and all the security that goes with it, it's okay to be disappointed.

It's okay to bring your grief and your doubts to God.

### A CROSS-SHAPED SALVATION

The Bible teaches us that not everything goes our way, and oddly enough not everything goes God's way.

But, God has a way of taking a cross; God has a way of taking our broken and fear-ridden lives and turning things around. We can express our disappointment to God, but we need to remember that, like Peter, we have more to learn. God has a way of showing up in the broken places of our lives.

In the cross and resurrection of Jesus we discover not the God we want but the God we desperately need. He is the God who sheds glory to join us in our shame. He is the God who leaves heaven to enter our hells on earth. He is the God who abandons strength, at least strength, as we know it, in order to save us in our places of weakness.

Yes, I can defend Peter. Like him I do not want to follow Jesus on that road to the cross.

But, I have learned, and I will continue to learn that God's strong love surrounds me when I am broken and bruised. And oddly enough the way to get better is not to "expect a miracle". The way to get better is to take up a cross and follow Jesus.

I know. We're not Jesus. We're not going to die on the cross for the world.

But, we can live a life that is cruciform in shape. We can live a life that is marked by service and sacrifice. We can give up our expectations, our hopes and dreams in order to follow our Savior.

And oddly enough, when we do that, life is more abundant. Our hope is more sure.

### COMMUNION

The prayer that I often use after communion says it all. Just as Jesus serves us in the sacrament of communion, so we go out into the world to serve others in His name.

It's hard to tell people our sorrows and disappointments. There's always the temptation to run away from them. And when we run away, we can find ourselves in some very lonely places.

But, when we take the Lord's Supper, when we take communion we remember that we are not alone. The Spirit of God in Christ is with us. We have communion with him.

And we also have communion with our fellow Christians, our fellow travelers on the road the cross and the resurrection. We pray for each other. We support each other. We give thanks for each other.

Yes, Peter was disappointed with Jesus, and that isolated him not only from his Lord but also from everyone else. But, like Peter we can still come back to Jesus. We can still get on the right track.

We are a community that believes in redemption. We are community that believes God takes body broken and blood shed and turns those symbols of pain into symbols of eternal hope.

Our anthem this morning is entitled Invitation to Communion. That's my invitation to you this day. I invite you to come together in faith. I invite you to join Jesus and his people.

I invite you to imagine the church in a different way. The church isn't the place where we have it all together. The church is the place to which we run when life is falling apart.

Come to the table. Find the grace of God.

Amen.