

Lent 2B 2021 Mark 8:31-38

At camp at the end of the day we used to share highs and lows—whatever we thought was the best and worst part of our day. Strictly speaking, that's not a biblical practice, unless you have a day like Peter had in the eighth chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus takes the disciples to Caesarea Philippi, historically a sacred space for all different religions; Canaanites, ancient Israelites, Greeks, and Romans all worshipped their respective deities there. In that place which invites the question: *Which God do you worship?* Jesus asks the disciples, *Who do you say that I am?* And Peter gives the correct answer, *You are the Messiah!* That's the high point; then things immediately go South.

Jesus explains that the the Son of Man will undergo suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Mark tell us he taught this openly—there's no hidden agenda here. Peter takes Jesus aside privately to try to get him to stop saying these things. Most likely Peter is confused, because he, like all of Israel, is expecting the Messiah to be a very practical kind of savior—a political or military hero who rescues the people from the Roman occupation and returns them to self-rule and the proper practice of their religion. But Jesus doesn't describe himself as a victorious leader; he describes a despised loser. Peter is correct in thinking that nobody is going to want to follow Jesus if that's the plan. But not only would Peter have been discouraged by what it would mean to their movement if Jesus failed to be the Messianic leader they anticipated, we can safely assume Peter also cared, personally, about Jesus, his teacher and friend, and he didn't want him to suffer, be rejected, and die. Peter has the right motivations, but if he recognized that Jesus was God's chosen servant, then we might have expected him to trust that Jesus knew what he was talking about.

Jesus makes his position clear to all the disciples in no uncertain terms: *Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on God's ways but on human ways.* And that one accusation right there is probably the best and most complete explanation of why we, as individual followers of Christ and as the church of Christ throughout the ages, so often find ourselves so far from where God calls us to be. We cannot ignore the way that God has always worked and attribute human values and methods to God instead. God does not think and act the way that human institutions teach us to think and act. As followers of Christ, we're called to reflect the image of God in which we are made; we are not supposed to remake God in our image.

Jesus is going to teach, preach, feed, heal, and drive out demons in an unapologetic life that reflects the will of a good, gracious, merciful, just, and loving God—values that oppose the

human tendencies to greed, competition, vengeance, exploitation, and hate. Challenging those who have acquired their power by these human principles will predictably result in them trying to silence Jesus and make an example of him, lest others should endanger their position and upset the status quo. Jesus isn't crucified because he's too nice a guy; he is crucified because his way of life threatens a system that claims its authority comes from God but in fact acts in every way ungodly.

Jesus' invitation to his followers is also a warning: *If anyone wants to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me.* Jesus is not advocating suffering for suffering's sake; there is nothing redemptive in suffering itself. But he's being honest with the disciples about what is going to happen to him when he lives the way God calls all people to live. And he's warning them—that is, us—that if we likewise live the way God calls us to live, we should expect that the consequence may be hardship—not a life of glorious success by human standards. If we're going to choose God's values over the values of the world, it's natural that we will sometimes find ourselves at odds with our families, our neighbors, and the goals toward which our society teaches us to strive. We aren't called to seek out suffering, but we shouldn't be as befuddled as we sometimes are when, for instance, doing the right thing ends up being really hard. It's human tendency to think if we aren't healthy and wealthy and happy that we've somehow done something wrong; but Jesus did everything exactly right, and it wasn't in spite of that but because of it that he ended up on the cross.

Except, of course, that the cross was not the end. Jesus doesn't just warn us of his suffering and death; he points further ahead, that after three days he will rise again. That's the only way resurrection works: he can't rise from the grave without first being buried in it. And that, too, is instructive for us. There are parts of our lives that don't need to be avoided, protected, polished, tweaked, or salvaged. There are some things that need to die, because sometimes only resurrection will do. When we choose to hang onto those things, resurrection can't happen; so Jesus tells us—*lose it. Let go of it for my sake, and see how I can save your life.* He's not just talking about the life to come, but this life, now.

We aren't meant to think of Lent as *our* journey toward the cross; that journey belongs to Jesus and Jesus alone. But although we know already that we'll never live the perfect life that Jesus led, we are called to die trying—that is, to die to all the human ways we would choose over the divine way that Jesus taught. It's hard, and it hurts, because death is hard, and death hurts. But, thanks be to God, on the other side of death is resurrection.