

Mark 8:27-9:8

Long thought to be the briefest, and for that reason rather pedestrian, of the four Evangelists, Mark turns out to be a master of suspense and surprise. In this passage, a carefully developed, though largely implicit, element of suspense and tension is finally made explicit in Jesus' questioning of his disciples. Up to this point in Mark's story, no one is quite sure what to make of Jesus. In fact, no one even knows who he is, except, that is, for the reader. Mark tips his hand in his prologue when he writes: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God."

And so when we read Mark's Gospel, we feel that same sense of tension you do whenever you watch a movie and know something the main characters don't know – you want them to figure it out and wonder what will happen if they don't. And so we almost breathe a sigh of relief when Peter, in a flash of insight, is no longer content with viewing Jesus as one of the prophets, old or new, but realizes that Jesus is God's Messiah, the one chosen and anointed to deliver Israel from oppression. He's finally gotten it!

This confession at Caesarea Philippi marks one of the high points of Peter's discipleship. Peter is the first human being to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Only the reader knows Jesus' identity from the beginning. Up to this point in the narrative, no one else has identified him as *Christos*. The voice from heaven at his baptism, the demons who challenged him, and the angels, know Jesus to be more than an ordinary mortal but even they do not acknowledge him specifically as Messiah. Therefore, when Peter declares Jesus to be the Christ, the reader

already knows he has hit the jackpot. He now stands in the category quite apart from the rest. He has moved from being listed among the twelve, to being set apart as one of three, to now being the only human being who really knows who Jesus is.

Absent from Mark's recording of this incident is the approval of Jesus or the suggestion that Peter's confession is based on divine revelation as found in Matthew's Gospel. For Mark, Peter's declaration is not the result of divine revelation; hard as it may be to believe. Peter has actually paid attention. Based on the things he has seen and heard, he concludes that Jesus is the Christ. Peter's "confession" is considered to be the *turning point* of Mark's story. These verses stand at the physical centre of the story and they begin to move us toward a revelation of the true identity of Jesus the Messiah. Additionally, Peter is not declared to be the rock upon which the church is built. Instead, Peter's name (*petra* in the Greek), in Mark's Gospel, refers to the type of **soil** he is. Like the rocky soil Jesus describes in the Parable of the Sower, Peter will fall away when persecution comes his way.

Following immediately upon Peter's confession is Jesus' first "passion and resurrection" prediction. Jesus reveals that the Messiah must suffer many things, be killed, and be raised on the third day. This is simply too much for Peter. He obviously cannot comprehend a suffering Messiah. The tension of Mark's story lies in the reality that Jesus is simply not the kind of Messiah that people expect. Messianic expectations were expectations of *glory*. Dreams of glory and power must have danced in Peter's head when he made his "confession". But, he still had it all wrong. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah but what Peter misunderstands is the fact that Jesus is a *suffering* Messiah. Peter has clearly not understood

what it means to be Messiah. Peter dreams of glory. Jesus' teaching is his attempt to prepare his followers for the consequences of following a Messiah like him.

Jesus will suffer rejection and death, at the hands of the religious leaders of his day. The rejection and death are the social and physical consequences of his ministry. Peter's failure is not his inability to see the type of Messiah Jesus is, but his failure to accept that these are the possible consequences of Jesus' ministry. His rejection of these consequences is highlighted by the fact that Peter scolds Jesus. In language identical to Jesus' verbal exorcism of demons, Peter rebukes Jesus. Confession turns to confrontation.

Jesus now takes the opportunity to teach about discipleship. He extends an open invitation, thereby making it clear that anyone can follow him. However, any would-be follower should prepare him or herself for the possible consequences. Just as Jesus' ministry has social and physical repercussions, so will the ministry of the disciples who follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Therefore, Jesus commands them to "deny themselves" and "take up the cross". In other words, they must not allow society to dictate their actions or allow societal standards to determine their sense of self-worth. They also must be prepared for the physical consequences of discipleship including death. For the first time in Mark's Gospel, the cross is mentioned. The cross stands as a brutal reminder of the most shameful and excruciating form of capital punishment known to Mark's original audience. Interestingly enough, it is not mentioned in reference to Jesus but to his followers.

It seems like humankind has been trying to make peace with an angry

god from the beginning of time. From sacrificing virgins, to self-flagellation, to whatever gift of obligation we can think up, we keep approaching the spiritual world as something to be paid off with a bribe. Then, once we think we've paid this week's protection money, we ignore the divine and move on to something else more pleasant ... until the next time the Godfather demands a pound of flesh.

Both of these approaches — the payoff and the ignoring — are wrong. And yet, when this week's Gospel is read, all that can be seen by many is another angry god, telling us that the only way to approach this god is to practice asceticism or self-denial — and — do it for the rest of our life.

Many Christians have the “deny yourself” thing all wrong. AND, they are missing the rest of the formula, because we never talk about it. So let's talk about It ... First of all, the Greek word translated “deny” is the same one used to describe what Peter does with Jesus around that campfire. When asked, Peter said he didn't know Jesus, had no connection with him.

In fact, these are the only two uses of the word in the entire New Testament: Peter denying Jesus, and Jesus saying we must deny ourselves. What does this mean? Well, first of all, it is clear that Jesus is NOT saying that we have to give up this or that, or try to forget our normal human needs, or live some ascetic life. “Deny yourself” is not about self-abnegation. It's harder than that.

To deny yourself like Peter denied Jesus is to set aside your own interests in order to discern God's interests. It is to state that, in effect, you do not know You, and since you don't know You, you also have no

idea what that You, that person, would want. Thus, you are ready to do what God wants.

BUT — and this is critical — the verse doesn't stop there. Jesus gives us a three-part formula for being his disciple. If we don't get all three parts, we miss the point of his teaching. First is the denying of one's own interests. THEN, there is taking up the cross. In brief, "bearing our cross" is NOT about dealing with some normal suffering or problem or part of human existence. That happens to everyone, every day.

When Jesus took up his cross, what did he do? He *chose* (he wasn't forced) to carry out the ministry that God wanted him to do. THAT is what "take up your cross" means — you make an active choice to live into the ministry that God has called you to do, every day.

So we have turned away from our own plans, and turned toward God's plans, and have chosen to live in ministry, OUR own unique ministry, day by day. BUT WAIT — there's a third part. "And follow me."

Jesus said to deny ourselves, take up our cross of personal ministry, and then follow him. Guess what? When you follow someone, you wait on their lead. If I'm going to follow you in your car so you can show me the way to that new restaurant, I don't leave first, and I don't pass you on the way! I stay behind, watching for turn signals and lane changes, and I let YOU lead.

There will be times when Jesus will say "go" and times when he will say "wait." There are times where he will say "work hard, you know what to do", and times where he will say "stop working and rest". And there will

even be times where he will say “give me your backpack and wait here. I’ll be back with your new backpack in a few days and I will lead you to something new.” It’s all part of “follow me”.

Jesus gave us a three-part formula for discipleship, and we need to understand and do all three parts to be successful: give up claim to ourselves, make a choice to live into our own unique ministry, and let Jesus lead us.

Jesus introduces a different valuation for honour and work to the ancient Mediterranean society. It will not be the court of public opinion, the societal elite, or the oppressive Roman government. It will be God who determines what is honourable. And what is honourable is following Jesus. That is why Jesus will be raised from the dead and will come in the glory of his father.

So, six days later, Peter, still confused, once again joins the company of James and John as the three are going up the mountain to be with Jesus alone. When they get there, the disciples witness Jesus all aglow, talking with Elijah and Moses, both of whom had divine encounters on Mount Sinai or Horeb. Some scholars maintain that the appearance of Moses and Elijah represents the Law and the Prophets. Perhaps their presence with Jesus is Mark’s way of telling the reader that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

Peter, James, and John are privy to something very important. Here Peter basks in the glory and pleads that it might continue. Peter says to Jesus: “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” And Peter makes his

third transition here.

He has moved from confession to confrontation, and in the midst of this grand spectacle, he now moves to confusion by suggesting that they make three dwelling places or booths. Again, the disciples were *terrified* and again they appear as men of fear rather than faith. In their fear-filled lack of faith they long for glory. Peter's reaction is like looking directly at a light bulb and going blind instead of looking around the room and understanding what the light from the bulb reveals.

He correctly grasps the magnitude of this moment; however, he gives the wrong response. This is not the time for building or speaking. Now is the time to listen. That is what the voice in the cloud tells them as once again Jesus is referred to as the "Beloved Son", as he was during his baptism.

With the voice of God ringing in our ears, the gospel proclaims that this is unmistakably the one at the centre of the movement. This is a matter of vision. It's a matter of hearing and following. Jesus is the one on whom the spirit rests.

At the same time, here, in the middle of the gospel, we find the tension between the vision that the movement stands for, and the tendency to reduce that vision and movement to an institution. Peter's attempt to nail the movement down to a particular time and place voices our constant propensity to turn Jesus the person, into Jesus the business model. Mark's response to that impetus is clear, "Peter didn't really know what he was talking about."

A living movement cannot be captured in one snapshot moment. A living movement lives from one moment to the next. The moment it gets nailed down is the moment it starts to die. Thus, it's at the moment Peter proposes turning the movement into a building that the dark cloud appears. It's the same darkness that covers the sky at the cross.

Therein lies the failure of Peter in the two preceding pericopes. He gets one correct answer and thinks he has them all. He does not listen when Jesus predicts his passion and resurrection. And here, he is talking even though no one has said a word to him.

So often, this is the failure of many of us as followers of Jesus Christ. We do not like what Jesus is saying or showing and so we rebuke him by rebuking and rejecting others. We do not like where Jesus is leading so we declare that it is not the right way, the right company, the right timing, nor the right assignment.

Sometimes, we are inserting our voices into the silence of God. Like Peter, James, and John, God may give us access to situations in which we are not invited to be talking partners – but have been extended the privilege of listening and observing.

This little story stands at the very centre of Mark's story of Jesus and marks the turn from Jesus' teaching and preaching throughout Galilee and its environs to his steadfast, even relentless, march to the cross. In this sense, it is the pivotal point of the Gospel, which is why this story is so crucial.

Self-denial and cross-bearing are not about being less happy, but about discovering the real and abundant life – a kind of life our culture can hardly imagine – a kind of life that comes in and through sacrificial love – in service to another – as we deny ourselves, carry our cross, and follow Jesus. There will be changes in people's lives when they come into contact with this chosen son of God. And let us hope that we will join with the crowds in astonishment and wonder that his presence and mission is a mark of the greatness of our God.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY FEBRUARY 11, 2024

Dear God, we come before You on this Transfiguration Sunday, to pray for a new vision of Your love and grace. We thank You for enlightening those first disciples, Peter, James, and John, with a vision of Jesus that confirmed their faith in the divinity of Your beloved Son, and confirmed his superiority to Moses and the Prophets. Renew in us Your Holy Spirit, and strengthen our trust in You, and in Jesus our Saviour.

Dear God, even as the days get longer and brighter towards spring, our world seems to be descending deeper into war, disease, famine and death – the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. As You did with Peter, James, and John, strengthen our faith and give us a clearer vision of Your power and glory and light, and of the glorious future to come, if not here, then hereafter.

Dear God, our planet is fragile and limited, but Your love is strong and unlimited. As we make our way through life on this little planet, help us to be good stewards of Your many gifts, so that we leave this life having been part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Dear God, we wonder if the massive floods are really Your tears, and the earthquakes are Your attempts to shake us into consciousness, and the great winds and gales are Your moaning and sighing over the sins that are destroying our beautiful planet. We groan along with our groaning earth, and we pray for repentance and environmental enlightenment among the people of the world, especially in the United States, where heavy rains and landslides have devastated parts of Southern California; where deadly forest fires have destroyed many acres along the Chilean coast, and where the Amazon rainforest, the so-called “lungs of the planet,” are gradually being logged, and for the country of Brazil where there is severe drought.

Dear God, renew and restore a vision of care for your creation among more and more people. Empower them by an appreciation of Your goodness and Your love proved in Christ. Remind us, O God, to take

what we need and use what we take. Encourage us toward a counter-cultural faithfulness and away from gross consumerism. Forgive our sins and renew us with insights and deeper understanding of what we must do to love You and our neighbour, and give us the spiritual strength to do it.

Dear God, we pray for our churches in this changing world, especially for our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, our national Bishop Susan Johnson, our BC Synod Bishop Kathy Martin, and for the whole Synod Council, that they may work for the good of the churches, and work with us at Grace in finding a way forward for our congregation. We pray also for Hope Lutheran Church in Nanaimo and Rev. Terry Richardson; for the Church of the Cross and Luther Court in Victoria; for the ministry of Canadian campus pastors and hospital chaplains; and for the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and their Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Dear God, we pray for the people of the United States in this year of elections, that You would guide them towards peace and justice and fairness and consideration of those who disagree with them. Help them to remember their Christian roots, and give them faith in Your power to guide them, so that their fears will be eased and their democracy may be preserved.

Dear God, we pray for all victims of other people's anger and hatred and discrimination. Free us to be more loving and accepting of those who are different from us, even while being careful to distinguish between good and evil. We pray especially for the poor and homeless in our own land, for all those who are alone and lonely, who are tempted to find relief through addictive drugs or alcohol.

Dear God, renew our vision of Your Son, Jesus, who is the truth, who proved that love is stronger than hate; that peace is possible; and that life can emerge even in the midst of devastation. We pray for that Gospel truth will be shared and known among more and more people who desperately need to feel it in their spirit.

Dear God, in this new year, give us new hope, and new power to follow in the footsteps of our Saviour, who is the way, the truth and the life.

We ask all these things in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray:

Our Father in heaven ...