

Proverbs 1:20-33
Mark 8:27-38 (p. 43 NT)

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Devon, Pennsylvania
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The Great Paradox

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. He said all this quite openly. . . .

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.” (*Mark 8:31, 34*)

Our text, for all its apparent darkness, is about the hope that springs out of the resurrection that has the capacity to touch and change and heal everything—but always through us, not independently of us. But you cannot have a resurrection without a dying. That is the great Christian paradox. Death and resurrection is so evident in nature, especially in the season that now beckons. But it isn't a journey we want for ourselves. Still, today's gospel message says that we have to go there first.

Do you recall the image of the Roman figure of Janus (“jay-nus”), who had two faces, one perpetually looking to the future, the other to the past. It's from his name, as the God who opens new doors, that the first month on our calendar, January, is named. It's a striking image for today's assigned text from Mark's Gospel, because it stands at the end of the first half of Mark's story of Jesus, looking backward. It also opens the door to the second half of the gospel by predicting what lies ahead. Looking back, the gospel paints a double picture, on the one hand of Jesus as an extraordinary teacher and a healer beyond imagining. On the other, these very qualities escalate the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day who are unwilling to give up their hold on the people. One does not have to look too far in recent times to see these same dynamics in the political upheavals of Iran, Afghanistan, and much closer to home.

It's hard for us to read this passage and not sympathize with Peter. After all, after Jesus asks the disciples who the people perceive him to be, they're clearly not sure: John the Baptist come back to life (King Herod had killed John); OT Elijah returned; perhaps some other prophet, they wonder? But, Peter speaks up, “You are the Christ,” the Messiah (they mean the same thing). Sounds good so far. Then Jesus says a seemingly odd thing—actually he's said it repeatedly in Mark—“Don't you dare tell anyone about this!” Truth is, it's meaningless unless it springs from within as an irrepressible statement of belief. Otherwise, it's just a name. It's actually the only “faith question” we ever ask of new members. “Do you *believe* that Jesus is the Christ?” Meaning, does your heart lead you to trust that Jesus is the Christ, the chosen one of God.

But there's another reason, and it stuns the disciples. For centuries it was believed that the coming Christ/Messiah would be a political savior, a military figure bringing radical emancipation by force after centuries of foreign rule. So when Jesus now tells the disciples for the first time that he “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,” it sounds absolutely ludicrous. Imagine General Ray Odierno, that great hulk of a man who's now commanding the Multi-National Force in Iraq, saying to his staff, “By the way, I'm going to be handed over to the other side shortly, by my own people, then beaten, tortured, and put to death in a hideous fashion, and none of you will lift a finger to intervene.” What would his dumfounded command staff say? The same thing Peter says, “That's just not going to happen; we won't let it!” That's when Jesus explodes. “*Get behind me, Satan!*” adding, as Peterson translates it, “You have no idea how God works.”

It's so tempting to presume here that this foreknowledge is having a toxic effect on Jesus. That the strain is just too much. It's tempting also to remind ourselves that Mark is writing his Gospel in the early A.D. 70's when the Romans had just demolished Jerusalem and the temple to quell Jewish uprisings. Then they dragged a plow clear across the decimated city, and in a final insult salted the ground to emphasize that nothing would grow there again, plant or human. Tens of thousands were slaughtered. It felt like the end of the world had come.

It's hard not to feel the imprint of those apocalyptic times on Mark's mind and the recollection of what Jesus was facing. But these things are ancillary to the truth. Peter has the title right when he says, "You are the Messiah," but like the disciples, the people, and us, he misunderstands its meaning. Jesus knows that the only way to God, in a cruel and unyielding world, is to reject the influence of the world and begin over with an entirely new vision of how to live and be. A "kingdom of God" vision. So, at the precise heart of this passage, we read:

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. For those who want to save their life will lose it" (*Mark 8:34-35a*).

And now, the perspective changes, looking forward instead of backward--remember Janus' two faces? Jesus says, "And those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it" (35b). Here is the resurrection piece, the key to hope, but not just any hope—hope that is willing to let go of life as we claim it and know it, and trusting God's wisdom and guidance. "Living in God."

Our predicament reminds me of the man driving down a magnificent, winding, coastal California highway. It was a glorious day, the ocean glistening far below, the wind in his golden hair, the top down—when suddenly his brakes failed. The hand break failed, crashing down through the gears failed! Then, like the last scene in "Thelma and Louise" he sails through the barricade and over the cliff. At the last moment he leaps from the car, and by a miracle catches hold of the branch of a tree. He's now hanging over a terrifying vertical drop, screaming for help. Nothing, above the sound of wind and crashing waves below.

"Is there anybody there?" he wails. Nothing

"Please, somebody! Is there anybody there.

Then—a voice out of the air all around him speaks.

"I am the Lord. Let go of the branch. I will save you."

The blood is fast draining from his fingers.

Again the voice, "Trust me—I am the Lord. Let go of the branch."

Then, after an agonizing silence the man calls, "Is there *anybody else* there?"

It is as though we are like creatures living in Edwin Abbot's now classic 1884 book, *Flatland*—a two dimensional world is the only thing its inhabitants know or comprehend. All the while, beyond their flatworm-like existence and even woven through it, is a three dimensional world which they cannot see, yet, while invited to trust it, they cling to what the evidence suggests.

Each of us is a nexus of unresolved needs, passions, anxieties, hopes. *We* cannot resolve them. *We* cannot change the people who irritate the tar out of us—at work or in the family. *We* get in our own way. *We* may move, change jobs, change spouses, friends—but we have a dispiriting way of taking ourselves with us—and not too much changes.

What I tell you, I tell you not because it is my job or, in this instance, because the gospel tells me too. I tell you because, perhaps like many of you, my experience confirms it. The hope of a differently oriented and deeply fulfilling life that Jesus promised is very *real*; it is also a journey. Not accidentally, our text this morning begins "on the way" somewhere (Mark 8:27). These things are never incidental language in the gospels.

Fred Craddock once told a group of pastors that giving our life to Jesus is not like writing a check that represents our net worth and handing it over to Jesus saying, “Here’s my life, Lord, take it all.” It is as though Jesus says, “Take this to the bank and exchange it for quarters and dimes, and give it away as you go, until all of it is gone. And when it is all gone, then you will have everything you need.”

Every day is a fresh challenge and a new commitment. Every minute is lifting up in prayer that stream of conscious need for those about you, asking God for wisdom, patience and courage—for the unresponsive child, the angry or too distant spouse, the difficult parent, the boss’s son or daughter at work, or for insight on some tricky technical issue job-wise (those are the easy ones compared with the relational). And when you lie in bed at night, lift up your hands in the quiet darkness—and offer yourself, empty your hands of yourself, give each need away piece by piece, give the sticky, turbulent pieces of your and others’ lives away, and—if you can—give it all at once, for now. And having given, wait, and watch what happens. For the resurrection he promised for himself, Jesus promised *only* so he could give it to you.

This is the great paradox; which is to say, the great truth.

For Jesus’ sake, and for all the hope he has in you. Amen