

“Dying and Rising: From Grasping to Trusting”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 and Mark 8:31-38

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This story from the gospel of Mark, though familiar to many of us, I'm sure, is raw with emotion, explosive, and somewhat shocking from our perspective as readers/hearers of the gospel. It is a story that is at a hinge point, a turning in the story of Jesus' ministry. Up until this point in Mark's gospel the disciples have seen Jesus do great things – feeding the multitudes, healing the sick, casting out demons, and teaching with authority. In the verses I added to our reading this morning Peter- speaking on behalf of the disciples- speaks the truth about who Jesus really is. It is a declaration of faith, of understanding. Yet that understanding and their faith is challenged when Jesus explains what him being the Messiah is going to entail.

I puzzled this week over why exactly Peter rebukes Jesus for his words. And I've come to believe his motives are complex and his reasons probably many. Firstly, I think Peter is disturbed and upset at the idea that his teacher, his mentor, and his friend will suffer and die. It's personal and visceral and deeply relatable. Our translation says that Peter takes Jesus aside, but in other places the word there means something more like he took hold of him. I imagine him grabbing Jesus as if to shake some sense into him. “NO!” this does not need to happen! NO! I can't lose you!

On another level I wonder if Peter also objects because it doesn't make sense to him that this would happen to the messiah! It's not entirely clear what the general consensus was about what the coming of the messiah would mean among the Hebrews at this time. Most likely because there doesn't seem to have been a general consensus so much as a variety of different beliefs and ideas that were by no means unified. Some certainly hoped for the coming of the messiah as the one who would end the oppression of the Roman empire once and for all. There were also hopes of a cosmic nature. A common thread through the messianic hopes was that it

would mean ultimate and lasting change and goodness for God's people. I do not believe that the messiah being rejected, suffering and dying was in anyone's mind. And so perhaps Peter is also rebuking Jesus for not having faith! As if he's saying "No! I just told you I believe you're the messiah- all our hopes rest in you- you cannot die, that's not how it's supposed to be."

I also want to just take a little side bar and note at this point that in all this Peter clearly heard the suffer and be killed part of what Jesus said, but didn't seem to notice the "after 3 days rise again".

Jesus' response to Peter is equally raw and vehement. Peter is grabbing onto Jesus and yelling at him, Jesus yells right back "Get Behind Me Satan". The words feel harsh- and they are. Jesus at once seems to say "Don't tempt me" while also saying that Peter "setting his mind on human things" or perhaps "putting his trust in human things" puts him in league with the demonic. But the words "Get Behind Me" are the same words- in Greek- that are also translated "Follow me" the same words that Jesus used to call the disciples in the first place. Amazingly in Jesus' rebuke there is once again a call to discipleship.

Then Jesus calls to the crowd to explain what this discipleship is about- now he's not just speaking to the disciples, but to the whole crowd and you and I are part of that great big crowd who receives these words. **"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, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."**

Now some honesty from me. I chose to preach on this passage- I picked out this Sunday when we were planning lent. But when it came to the point this week I found I really struggled with preaching it. I want with every fiber of my being to soften these words, to make them highly metaphorical and to assure you that Jesus will not ask too much of you. But that would be dishonest. It seems likely that for the community who originally received these words "taking up your cross" was not a metaphor, but a very present and possible reality for followers of Christ at the time. That is not the case for us, but I mention it because I want you to hear the seriousness of these words. But holding the seriousness and weight of these words I also need to be clear about what is not being said.

Jesus is not encouraging his followers to seek out suffering and death. Our Lord desires for all creation to be whole and well. These words are not meant to tell the oppressed to be content in their suffering, it does not mean God wishes us to stay in situations of abuse, or pain. And it certainly does not mean that God ordains suffering in our lives. No, here, Jesus acknowledges that the world is not as it should be and that the present reality that we face will hold suffering, loss, and even death. But like Peter, I think we get very caught up in the idea that following Christ might lead to loss and forget the bit about saving our lives- about truly living.

It is a serious acknowledgement that when we live not just with the goal of preserving our lives, but instead live to work and fight for the wholeness of all people we will encounter suffering, hardship, loss and maybe even death. That certainly was the case for Alexei Navalny last week

who died at the hands of oppressive political powers. And there have been many others who have lost their lives in the fight for justice, mercy, and true peace. Yet these words are also the acknowledgement that when we live merely to preserve our own lives and cannot bring ourselves to live for others we are not even really alive! It is an invitation to let go of our fears, to stop desperately grasping to our lives and the way we think it has to be, and to follow a path that seeks wholeness for all people. It is an invitation to trust that whatever sufferings, whatever crosses we encounter along that way have no power over us, they cannot take our lives not really, they cannot undo us.

Hear this also as the message for our church today- not just Market Square church, but all the churches. As we struggle with the shifts in society that see us losing numbers and our institutions slipping away, it is our human instinct to grasp ever more tightly; to live in fear about decreasing numbers and decreasing giving, and fewer institutional resources. We set our mind on human things just like Peter. And Jesus says, Get behind me, follow me. Are we able to hear him? Are we able to respond?

It is a good possibility that following Jesus together will not preserve us, will not “save” the institution at least not as it exists today. But in following Jesus, in working for justice and dignity for humankind, we will find true and full life together. If we are willing to stop grasping onto these human things and start trusting in our Lord and Savior though there will be loss, and change, and hardship, and things and people to grieve, there will also be rising, new life, abundant life that we cannot be open to receive while our fists are closed in grasping.

Would you pray with me... [prayer ending in Amen!]