

The Way of the Cross: Mark 8:27-38
March 6, 2022, Smoky Row Brethren Church

This Wednesday marked the beginning of the season in the church year known as Lent. You may have seen some of your friends with a smudge of ashes on their forehead in the shape of a cross. This is often accompanied at a service by the words, "Repent and believe the gospel" or "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Ash Wednesday began a 40-day season culminating in Passion Week and the celebration of Easter in which we remember Jesus journey to the cross by both practices of self-denial and often by adding a spiritual discipline that focuses us on following Christ. Today we are going to focus on the beginning of that final journey to Jerusalem.

Who Do You Say I Am? (vv. 27-30)

The account just read begins in Caesarea Philippi, one of the northernmost towns in Galilee at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Herod the Great had built a temple to Caesar who had given him the town and Philip the tetrarch had further adorned it, hence the name, Caesarea in honor of Caesar and Philippi, recognizing Philip.

It's interesting that it is in the town dedicated to the conquering emperor and his local vassal that is as far from the Holy City of Jerusalem as you could get in Jewish territory that Jesus asks the question, "who do the crowds say I am?" Some think he is John come back from the dead. Others think he might be Elijah, the prophet who was believed would return before the Messiah. Some thought he was another prophet—the power of his teaching and his miraculous works might suggest that.

Then Jesus asks the question that sooner or later, each of us must answer for ourselves. He asks, "who do you say I am?" of his disciples. I can imagine them looking at each other until Peter, who must have abhorred silences and vacuums speaks out. He says, "you are the Messiah." What this means is that he is saying Jesus is the king they have been waiting for. Throughout, Jesus has been preaching that God's kingdom is near. Peter has figured out why. The kingdom is near because the king is here. The one Israel has long awaited, anointed by God as David was, is here.

It may seem odd but Jesus says not to talk about this. In a town with Roman power written all over it, such talk could be dangerous, and could interfere with Jesus finishing his mission. Neither the crowds nor the authorities would understand. But a watershed moment has occurred. From here, the rest of Mark is Jesus's journey to and final week in Jerusalem—and then the resurrection. It is a watershed as well as the questions transitions from “who is this” to “what does it mean to follow this king”

What it Means to Be Messiah (vv. 31-33)

How would you complete this sentence if you did not have your Bible in front of you: “He then began to teach them...”? If I were them, I might think, “He then began to teach them how they would overthrow the power of Rome.” Instead, he says he must suffer, face rejection from all the Jewish leaders, be killed—and then he says “and after three days rise again.” I suspect they didn't even get the last part, even though Jesus is speaking plainly, not in parables. It is also important to note that this is essential to Jesus's mission—he *must* suffer

I really understand Peter's reaction. Criminals and lunatics suffer, are rejected, and killed. But God's anointed king? Peter, who seems so “in the know” takes it on himself rebuke Jesus. He pulls him aside and then lays into him. Rebuke is a hard word. I can imagine Peter in a stern voice saying, “you are not going to do that.” I wouldn't be surprised if Peter even added a few expletives. Mark, who gets his account from Peter doesn't tell us what Peter said.

Jesus answers just as sternly, getting the attention of the twelve. He speaks as if he were rebuking a demon—get behind me, Satan. Peter, thinking he's going to talk common sense into Jesus is speaking for Jesus's adversary. Jesus says there are two ways of thinking of Messianic power. The human thinks in terms of military conquest and political power—get the leaders on your side and lead a rebellion against Rome. Use your power to defeat them.

Remember that Satan already offered this kind of power to Jesus at his temptation and Jesus refused it. God's concerns are different. The only way to reconcile a humanity estranged from God and each other by sin, both Jew and Roman, and to establish a kingdom made up of people from every nation was for one to die for the sins of many. Later in Mark, Jesus says, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life for the ransom of many.

Peter didn't understand what kind of Messiah Jesus was. But do we? Sadly, I observe many, both conservative and liberal, trying to wed Jesus to their political hopes. Jesus didn't die to Make America Great Again or to Build Back Better. Jesus didn't die only for America. He died for the world. The problem with trying to tie Jesus to our politics is that our concerns are human and our agendas too small. Jesus died to restore all creation and to call a people of every nation to join him in that. To claim Jesus for anything less than that is Satanic. And there is no having it both ways.

What it means to be a disciple (vv. 34-38)

The kind of Messiah Jesus is determines what those who follow him must be like. Once again, Jesus speaks to the crowds, and while not telling them that he is Messiah, he tells them what it means to be one of his disciples—those who learn and follow his teaching. This is important because some may be thinking of him as the one to lead the rebellion against Rome, even if he hasn't named himself as Messiah.

He says they must deny themselves rather than jockeying for power. He says they must take up the cross, an instrument of shameful execution, rather than weapons of power, and they must go where he is going. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, when Christ calls a man or woman, he calls them to come and die.

He then frames the two ways we may live in terms of a paradox. We can try to save our lives and end up losing them. Or we can lose our lives for Jesus and his good news and save our lives. The missionary, Jim Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." That is what Jesus says in asking whether the whole world is worth the forfeit of our souls.

Crucifixion was regarded as shameful. It was a brutal display of Roman power that said that some were not worthy of life. Crucifixion involved beating, nails driven into flesh, and hanging naked in front of a crowd of mocking people. It was reserved for the worst kind of criminals. It also was reserved for the Messiah. We often distance ourselves from criminals. Will we be ashamed of Jesus? Our culture glorifies success, and we wonder if we should be ashamed if we suffer for Christ. Instead, we should keep verse 38 in mind, including its reverse—that those who are not ashamed of Christ will be those of whom Christ is not ashamed.

Conclusion

So, to bring it all home, I want to remind you of your baptism. In baptism, we died to ourselves and rose out of the waters alive in Christ. Lent is a reminder to forgetful disciples like me of what was proclaimed in our baptism. It was life in the way of the cross. Lent not only says “remember, you will die, but also, remember, you have died in Christ.” Lent is the season where we hear the call of Jesus saying “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.”

Sometimes denying takes the form of forgoing candy, or meat, or Facebook. None of these are wrong and may reflect deeper things in our lives—appetites that have a overly large place in our lives. Getting off Facebook may speak to saying “no” to self-promotion. Some have found giving away one item a day is a way to let go of being owned by our things. More challenging are things like denying that I am in control of my time, or denying that I have any rights, but only gifts.

The cross is an instrument of execution. Is there something that needs to be put to death in your life? I’ve become aware of how important being right and thought of well is to me. Putting it to death means listening to criticism, even if I think it unjust, without defending myself.

Finally, Jesus bids us to follow him. Lent is often a time of beginning a new spiritual practice either to obey Jesus in a particular way or to listen for his voice. Recently, I read a book on listening to Jesus in prayer and want to take time through Lent to do that.

So, if you call Jesus your Messiah, I invite you to see Lent as this season where you journey with him once again to the cross in hope of resurrection. And as you consider that, if you have not already, you might consider three questions based on the call of Jesus to deny self, take up the cross, and follow him:

1. Is there one practice of self-denial that Jesus is inviting you into to draw closer to him?
2. Is there something in your life that needs nailing to the cross, that needs to be put to death?
3. What practice might you begin during Lent that will help you follow Jesus?

All this is walking in the way of the cross, living toward the hope of life on the other side. And Lent is a good time to remember.