

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Sunday, February 28, 2021

Mark 8:31-38

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹ 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. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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,^[a] will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words^[b] in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Narrative context is so important.

When this passage is taken out of context, it seems to suggest that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is to suffer and die. However, when we read it within its narrative context, we come to see that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is to give life—knowing that earthly powers will violently oppose them.

The passage picks up in the middle of a private conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus has just acknowledged that he is the Messiah, the anointed king through whom God will deliver God’s people (Mark 8:27-30). We can imagine that the disciples associate this title with earthly glory. After all, they will soon argue about which one of them is the greatest (Mark 9:33-34), and some will request from Jesus the most honorable seats in his kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). In the disciples’ defense, they have witnessed a great deal of local fanfare, with crowds of mostly

peasant villagers swarming to Jesus in order to witness and receive his healing powers (for example, Mark 2:1; 3:7-10; 4:1; 6:53-56). When local leaders oppose Jesus, he always bests them in debate (Mark 2:6-12; 3:22-27; 7:1-13), so we cannot really blame the disciples for seeing their future, as Jesus' closest followers, through rose-colored glasses.

But now, in the middle of Mark's narrative, Jesus lays it out plainly. To this point, he has spoken only cryptically about persecution (Mark 4:17). Now he says clearly that he, the Son of Man, must undergo rejection, suffering, and death (verse 31). It is precisely for this reason that his followers will take up crosses and lose their lives (verses 34-35). Yes, Jesus will rise again, and yes, persecuted and martyred disciples will receive new life. But the hard truth is that the road to messianic glory runs through Golgotha. The disciples are following Jesus to a cross.

Much depends on how we interpret the "must" (*dei*: "it is necessary") of verse 31. Too often the word is taken to mean that Jesus' mission is principally to suffer and die, with interpreters inferring a latent theology of vicarious atonement. In this reading, Jesus "must" go to the cross in order to affect a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. But while Mark may hint at some mysterious efficacy to Jesus' death (10:45; 14:22-25), he is far from so specific an atonement theology (contrast Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 9:23-28). More to the point, when we pan out beyond one or two isolated verses, we find that the overarching narrative offers a simpler, but no less profound, explanation of Jesus' death: Jesus dies because powerful humans oppose both his healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption that mission brings to established law and order. Unbeknownst to Jesus' opponents, they are opposing the in-breaking reign ("kingdom") of God.

This pattern of disruption plays out in Mark's early conflict scenes. Jesus is unflinching in his insistence that the divine mission to welcome and reconcile sinners overrides the stigma of associating with them (2:15-17). He is also unflinching in his insistence that the divine mission to alleviate human suffering overrides any application of religious tradition that might impede it (2:23-28; 3:1-6; 7:1-23). To be clear, this is not a "Christian" correction to supposedly "legalistic" Judaism as much as it is a radical channeling of longstanding Jewish belief in God's compassion for the marginalized. As the messianic emissary of this divine mission, Jesus

inevitably elicits antagonism—eventually violent antagonism—from those invested in maintaining the status quo.

So the real epiphany of Mark 8:31 is not that Jesus' *mission* is to die, but that his faithfulness to God's healing mission will inevitably *result* in his death. In Mark, Jesus "must" die because his commitment to human healing will not falter. With two millennia of Holy Weeks under our belts, we can easily underestimate the power of this epiphany. Essentially, Mark is saying that the Son of God will not dial down his ministry to spare his own life, or even to ease his suffering. His commitment to the healing of humanity literally knows no limits. And neither—Easter tells us—does God's life-giving power.

It is not hard to see why Peter so quickly "rebukes" Jesus' prediction (verse 31). As noted above, Mark gives a rather straight-forward presentation of disciples captivated by hopes of earthly glory and therefore preoccupied more with Jesus' messianic *title* than his life-giving *mission*. Of course, the title "Messiah" is helpful for establishing Jesus' God-given authority. But that same title is dangerously specious when detached from Jesus' own counter-cultural mission on behalf of the broken and outcast. Mark would rather see people following Jesus unpretentiously in this mission, and actually participating in this holy work, than waving signs or posting memes in Jesus' name. So consequential is this point that Jesus calls Peter "Satan" for his self-serving confusion (verse 33)!

Interestingly, Peter does seem to understand something vital, namely that his own vocational future is wrapped up in, and defined by, the mission of Jesus. On that point he and Jesus agree. The question is whether Peter will embrace Jesus' definition of his own mission—which is the only definition that matters—and the consequences of that definition for his own vocation. This is the question over which the fellowship now begins to deteriorate and ultimately dissolves, as the disciples finally betray and abandon Jesus to his humiliating crucifixion (Mark 14:43-52, 66-72).

At the same time, Mark's audience most likely knows what Mark's narrative itself only promises, that the risen Jesus will re-gather his disciples and empower them for faithful mission in his name (13:9-10;

14:28; 16:7; see also 3:14-15; 6:7-13). In fact, given the standard dating of Mark (circa 70 CE), there is a good chance that both Mark and his early audiences knew about the martyrdom of James (circa 42-44 CE; see Mark 10:39; Acts 12:2) if not also the martyrdom of Peter (circa 64 CE; see John 21:18-19). These apostles were some of the first to epitomize Jesus' teaching on the cost of discipleship: denying themselves and taking up their crosses (verse 34), saving their lives by first losing it for the sake of the gospel (verse 35), seeing past the worldly shame of Jesus' crucifixion to the glory of his final appearance (verse 38).

Notice, however, that this is no longer a private conversation between Jesus and his inner circle. In verse 34, Jesus summons the surrounding crowd, eyeing the possibility of still more disciples. His repeated use of relative pronouns ("anyone," verse 34; "whoever," verse 35; "whoever," verse 38), while somewhat muted in the NRSV, makes it clear that the cost of discipleship is not limited to an apostolic few. Anyone who purports to follow Jesus must understand the sacrifice involved. For Mark, discipleship is not some comfortable affiliation with Jesus but a life-changing—and potentially life-threatening—commitment to him.

It is a difficult message for today's preachers to appropriate. So much of North American Christianity—especially white Christianity—has been reduced to a comfortable affiliation with Jesus. Our tantrums against the specter of "relativism" hardly cloak the fact that there is little cost to our discipleship. Of course, some Christians are persecuted in certain parts of the world. Still, as preachers discern the relevance of this passage for today, they will do well to bear in mind that, for Mark at least, discipleship amounts to participation in Jesus' ministry. What makes the ministry of the Markan Jesus counter-cultural, and therefore the object of earthly hostility, is not that it is "Christian" per se but that it abides no impediment to the immediate restoration of the broken and outcast.