



Stride Toward Freedom: The Decisive Arrest

Mark 8:31-38

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Lent offers us a season of repentant discernment. In these 40 days leading up to Easter, we are invited to walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem, pondering why it is God's work to redeem the world would require the Son of God to be crucified. To borrow from the 12-step principles, the first step in fixing a problem is admitting we have one. Our personal invitation in this season is to consider the brokenness in our own lives, for it is the brokenness of our lives (both individually and collectively) we proclaim to be healed in the Easter resurrection.

Ultimately, as we reach our destination in Jerusalem, we will remember, reflect on, and mourn the grievous act of crucifixion, which took the life of Christ. Though on Easter we will proclaim the resurrection, which was made possible only following Jesus's death, it is worth the invitation in this season of Lent to ask, why did Jesus have to die? ... or perhaps, even more basic, *did* Jesus have to die?

These questions are fodder for great theological debate, and are, perhaps, one of the many reasons why we have so many different denominational bodies within Christendom – there is no universally agreed upon answer to these questions. So, while we may not get to a definitive answer this morning, I do believe the process of answering this question urges us to greater faithfulness in this season of Lent.

Let us begin with the text in Mark 8.

Jesus has been teaching and performing miracles in the region north of the Sea of Galilee. He's fed the multitudes and he's healed a blind man. In response to his teaching and his miraculous signs, Peter has just declared that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Our text in Mark 8:31 comes immediately after Peter makes this divine proclamation.

"Then [Jesus] 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."

In this opening line of our reading, we find the original Greek reads, it is "necessary the Son of Man suffer many things." The Greek word "*dei*", which in our NRSV translation reads "must undergo," is more literally translated using the word "necessary." Obviously, this verse makes it hard to argue that such a detrimental ending was 1) unavoidable or 2) superfluous. Scholar William C. Placher states, "He *must* undergo suffering and rejection, death and resurrection; this is not a good guess about what will happen or an indication simply of the path Jesus is choosing, but the affirmation that this way of suffering is God's plan for him."ⁱ

Such a directed path invites into question a challenging narrative, not first and foremost because it is inconceivable that the God of all things might choose to walk the way of human frailty to redeem human frailty, but that it doesn't make logical sense in our human comprehension. How does one win – how does one conquer – by giving themselves to death? Even in the best of human examples, we find

stories like that of the Trojan Horse, where a supposed gift of defeat becomes a vessel for destruction. We, as God's created, do not just roll over and give ourselves up without any hope of victory.

Peter seems to share in our lack of receptivity to such a notion. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Professor of New Testament, M. Eugene Boring, offers that when Peter pulls Jesus aside, the verb "took" takes on a patronizing role. "Peter assumes the role of Jesus' teacher."ⁱⁱ

Remember, Peter had just finished proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah. "Peter's prior understanding of the Messiah doubtless hindered his acceptance of Jesus' passion prediction."ⁱⁱⁱ In recent weeks, we studied a number of texts from the Old Testament that would have challenged the view of the First Century Jews, who were anticipating a Messiah to fulfill the role of militaristic and empirical king who would ultimately conquer the enemies of the people Israel. How can Jesus live up to such an expectation for the Messiah if he's destined to be rejected and killed by the very leaders of the Jewish temple who are anticipating the coming of the Messiah?

Jesus doesn't hesitate to respond, only, his response is not solely to Peter. Jesus turns and looks at all of the disciples. In front of Peter, "he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Even in the time of Jesus, it had long before been stated by the prophet Isaiah, "Your thoughts are not my thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord." Our limitations are often on display when trying to discern God's will or God's way.

Having rebuked Peter, Jesus then called to the crowds who were gathered nearby. To the crowds and the disciples, Jesus teaches them all, "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. ... Those who are ashamed of me and my words 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."

Jesus not only makes the statement that his path will lead to rejection and death, he further invites those who wish to follow him to understand their path may not look much different.

It's a challenging question, but perhaps instead of asking, "did *Jesus* have to die?" maybe we should be asking, "will *I* have to die?" What does following Jesus mean for *me*?

To process these questions in honest faithfulness, I think we have to think through two competing responses.

First, this narrative becomes perplexing when, as an honest reflection on history will uncover, such an invitation to suffering has been perverted as "the more righteous way" to provide power for oppressive empires and abusive relationships. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker write, "The glorification of anyone's suffering allows the glorification of all suffering." They continue, "Divine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers "without even raising his voice" is lauded as the hope of the world."^{iv}

I get it, defining Jesus' call to the cross "divine child abuse" may seem a bit of a reach, and yet, this invitation to suffer in the quest for freedom has been used to keep quiet many a child, spouse, servant,

or slave who was, for their parent, teacher, priest, or master's own pleasure, abused. One cannot simply lift up suffering for the sake of suffering as a righteous undertaking when still today, in the streets of our own nation, we find people begging for their breath wondering, how much suffering must a people endure before they've suffered enough to secure their freedom? How many dead bodies must fill the streets before the blood thirsty are satisfied to give up their quest for superiority and power?

Suffering is not righteous in and of itself, especially when the suffering is inflicted in a grotesque abuse of the Biblical promise and invitation.

Secondly, to understand the direction and invitation of Jesus, one must appropriately couch this story in its historical context.

When Jesus invited his followers to "pick up their cross," the kind of suffering Jesus intended was made perfectly clear. Our lack of contextualization is perhaps the reason for our abuse of this text. As John Howard Yoder notes, "The cross of Calvary was not a difficult family situation, not a frustration of visions of personal fulfillment, a crushing debt, or a nagging in-law; it was the political, legally to be expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society."^v The cross was a four-letter word, or a foulmouthed hand gesture, that the Romans used to make their power known over those whose lands they occupied. It was a punishment reserved for those who dared to challenge the way of empire – those whose crime was deemed treasonous against the state.

To take up one's cross was to acknowledge that the way of God is antithetical to the way of the empire. "Risking this particular kind of suffering is not a form of accepting an oppressive order, but a way of challenging it."^{vi}

When considering the context of Jesus' invitation, the question of, "did Jesus have to die?" is perhaps best answered by asking the question in reverse: "Was it possible for Jesus to be 100% committed to God's will for humanity *without* facing the burden of the Roman cross?" Or, drop Jesus in the flesh in any era of human history, could Jesus have come into the world at any time and not faced capital punishment at the request of human empire? Had it been 700 BCE, would not the Babylonians have sought to kill him when forcing exile upon Israel? Had it been the 11th Century, would not Pope Urban II have wanted Jesus dead when launching the Crusades against the Byzantines? Had it been the 1940s, would not Nazi Germany have sought to kill Jesus, a Jewish man speaking about religious freedom? What about today? Do we really not think that Christian nationalists wouldn't seek to kill him, a political activist who regularly speaks out against king and empire, not to mention his chastisement against church leaders?

Perhaps the question isn't, "did Jesus have to die?" Perhaps the question we should be asking is, "Is it really possible to be 100% committed to God's will and not face the whitelash of the empire?"

In this season of Lent, we are utilizing the writing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, in his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*. In this third week, we're talking about the arrest of Rosa Parks.

Dr. King names that, on December 1, 1955, as Mrs. Parks boarded the bus in the afternoon on her way home, she had sat down on the first row behind the section reserved for whites. She was not intentionally causing a problem when she sat down on the bus that day; she sat in a section she was

legally entitled to sit in. Yet, as the bus began to fill, and soon every seat was occupied, she was ordered by the bus driver to stand up and make room for another white man who had boarded the bus. His presence and comfort were deemed more important than hers. She quietly refused. She didn't put up a fight, she just didn't stand up, and she was arrested as a result.

In the days to come, a number of speculations were made as to why she would have refused to stand up and make room for the white man who was looking for a seat. Dr. King names, "no one can understand the action of Mrs. Parks unless he realizes that eventually the cup of endurance runs over, and the human personality cries out, "I can take it no longer." ... It was an individual expression of a timeless longing for human dignity and freedom."^{vii}

In the days to come, the black community worked quickly and in concert with one another to begin the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Only, Dr. King says he didn't see it as a boycott. He says we were "withdrawing our cooperation from an evil system, rather than merely withdrawing our economic support from the bus company." He continues, "Our concern would not be to put the bus company out of business, but to put justice in business."^{viii}

Mrs. Parks was not Jesus. Her arrest did not bring about the freedom of humanity from the wages of sin and death. And yet, if you want to know what it looks like to pick up your cross – to sit in opposition of the oppressive powers of human empire knowing full well that your health and well-being are on the line ... well, Mrs. Parks would be worth your focus. "If you want to save your life, you must lose it, for those who lose their life for my sake," says the Lord, "and for the sake of the gospel, they will save it."

We spend an inordinate amount of time in the church talking about how many people we can "get saved," when Jesus makes it clear that our call is not to save ourselves, but to give ourselves up to the will of God that stands against the powers of empire. That is how we save ourselves.

The invitation of Christ is not one of comfort and luxury, at least not in this lifetime, it's a call to pick up your cross – to bear the hatred of power – to stand in opposition of tyranny – to speak up on behalf of the marginalized – to give life to those whose life is being taken away, and voice to those whose voice has been ignored. Indeed, the invitation to pick up your cross and follow Jesus is an invitation to be exhausted, already, with the lack of human dignity and freedom offered by empires and powers of humanity. So may we pick up our cross, knowing full well that the path to God's eternal freedom is marked by standing on the promises of God our Savior, who calls and leads, and shows us the path to righteousness that all of God's created might receive the gift of new life. For the glory of God, Amen.

ⁱ William C. Placher. *Mark: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ M. Eugene Boring. *Mark: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lamar Williamson Jr. *Mark: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

^{iv} Joann Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*. Pilgrim Press, 1989.

^v John Howard Yoder. *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994.

^{vi} Placher.

^{vii} Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1958.

^{viii} King.