Again & Again, We are Called to Listen
Mark 8:31-9:8 & Psalm 22:23-31
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Washington Street UMC
February 25, 2024

The season of Lent is a time of preparation. It invites us into an intentional time of acknowledging our need for God to do something we could not – to provide a new path forward that leads to life. Even as faithful as we may be, we are often stuck in the pattern of messing up over and over again. We continue to rely on the offerings of society for power and prestige, which leads us further and further from the reality of God's witness to love and life in Jesus Christ.

Last week, we were reminded that even when we fail to see God's presence, God is with us. Again and again, God meets us.

This morning, we are reminded that again and again, we are called to listen.

As a pastor in the United Methodist Church, I have responsibilities to serve beyond the walls of this church and beyond the pastoral necessities of this congregation. I have served in past years on the district committee on finance, and on the Conference Commission for Ethnic Minority Concerns and Advocacy. I have also served for a number of years as a mentor for those seeking ordination in the United Methodist Church.

I remember in one conversation with the mentees I was working with, we were discussing the statement "Jesus Christ is Lord." One of the questions that anyone seeking ordination must answer is what this statement, "Jesus Christ is Lord," means to them. One person offered a litany of thoughts around this statement, with an emphasis on the glory of the Lord as described throughout scripture. Their answer sounded a lot like Psalm 22.

Verse 23 begins, "'You who fear the Lord, praise him!' All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel."

The language of this psalmist offers little but high praise to the mighty ways of the Lord.

Picking back up in verse 27, the praise continues, "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations."

There is a lot of empirical language in this text, and it can, quite unassumingly, overtake our perception of who God is and how God intends to be creation's salvation. Even when praising the glory of God, we should recall the greater arc of the Biblical story to understand what *God* thinks about power.

Let us remember that following the institution of the judges, the people of Israel wanted a king, and God refused to give them one. God knew that, should they have a king, they would follow the same path as the other empires in the world who already had kings, and would become a unjust society more focused on wielding power than on following God.

God's hope is not to be just another one of the kings of the world. God has no desire to play the earthly game of who wields the biggest stick, or carries the most powerful gun, or controls the largest armies. Not only does God not have any desire to be involved in that kind of one-up-themship competition, God doesn't want us to engage in that kind of theater either.

For those who understand authority in the ways of empire, it can be risky to over-emphasize the power of the Lord, lest we put God into some comparison-fest with the other powers of the world. If there's anything the Psalmist makes clear, it's that God cannot be compared to the other empires of the world. Indeed, it is written, "all who sleep in the earth bow down; before God shall bow down all who go down to the dust." There is no comparison to God; of that, the Psalmist is certain. But we, as the faithful of God, often put ourselves on thin ice when we try to treat God's power like empirical power. This concern is a focus of our text in the Gospel of Mark this morning.

In Mark 8, Jesus is speaking with the disciples. Verse 31 comes on the heels of Peter's surprising proclamation about Jesus's identity. It is the first time that any of Jesus followers have correctly identified Jesus as being more than just another rabbi. When asked "Who do you say that I am," Peter responded, "You are the Messiah."

Peter was not wrong in his enlightened response, but Jesus was keenly aware of what he thought it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus knew that if he didn't offer a corrective teaching quickly, Peter and the other disciples were likely to go down the path of pitting and comparing Jesus, as the Messiah, to the leaders of other worldly regimes. Jesus as Messiah does not mean the same thing as another popular statement heard in the Roman empire during the first century: Caesar is lord.

Peter's proclamation of Jesus's Messiah-ship is offered in verse 29. Just two verses later, we're told, "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."

Jesus makes clear, "I don't know what you *think* it means for me to be the Messiah, but let me offer some clarity." … "The meaning of the title had to be revised by linking it to the Crucified, so that instead of a political liberator, a messianic king, there would be seen a suffering Messiah."[i]

But that didn't sit well, because Peter wasn't thinking of a suffering Messiah, he was thinking of a messianic king. Peter had the mindset of Christ as the Messiah in the full glory, one that outshined even the power of Caesar. So what happens in verse 32, just three verses after Peter's initial proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah? "Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him."

Peter couldn't reconcile Jesus's teaching with his image of Jesus' glory; he couldn't fathom that Jesus would undergo suffering and be killed by the scribes and priests. Jesus is *the* Messiah. Jesus is *the* Lord.

Jesus is something more than the scribes and the pharisees. Jesus is something greater than all of these other early leaders. How in the word are we supposed to believe that Jesus will suffer at the hands of anyone?

Following Peter's rebuke of Jesus, Jesus turns the rebuke around, saying "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus makes clear the problem that Peter is facing: his vision of a Messiah is built upon the powers of the world, not on the power of the divine.

The imperative to "get behind me," is both a statement of position – Jesus is the one in charge / he is the one with the power – and it is also an invitation to discipleship. Immediately following this rebuke, we're told that Jesus called the crowd to gather there with the disciples so that he could offer them a teaching. Though Jesus had only been speaking with the disciples during Peter's Messianic proclamation, Jesus is now going to turn to a larger audience to frame the invitation to discipleship.

In verse 34, Jesus says, "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."

Our position as the one behind Jesus becomes all the more clear. Jesus will be the one to lead us, and our rightful position as his followers is behind him. But, just as his path will lead him into the hands of the religious elite, so too will the path of those who follow him lead to such troubling ends. It is not just he, the Messiah, that will go to the cross, it is also our call, as those behind him … as those who follow up, to pick up *our* cross, denying ourselves for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus' teaching in that moment ends with this statement, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." This is a warning that Jesus is offering. Keep in mind, everyone Jesus is speaking to has chosen to follow him. These are a people who have left their homes, their jobs, and their families to follow Jesus, and now, Jesus is saying to them, some of you will not be rejoicing in the full power of God's kingdom.

Jesus is making plain and clear the invitation to discipleship: the call to follow Jesus as the Messiah is one that will require a challenging path forward. It will require going against the powers of the empire, and the powers of the church, to be faithful to the calling of God as witnessed in his teachings, in the person, ministry, life - death – and resurrection of Christ.

In the gospel text, Jesus' followers are left to mull over this teaching for almost a week. Chapter 9, verse 2, marks the passage of time, indicating that what comes next happens "Six days later …" Only, as the story picks back up, Jesus is no longer with the crowds and the full slate of disciples, Jesus is now travelling with just Peter, James, and John. The four of them went up a high mountain by themselves.

As the reach the top of the mountain, Mark, our author, wastes no time getting into the moment of significance. "Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no

one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus."

Try to put yourself in the disciples' sandals. Just a week ago, perhaps the last time you had really gathered with Jesus for any significant conversation, Jesus praised Peter for correctly identifying him as the Messiah, but then rebuked Peter for misunderstanding what such a title means. Jesus had made some odd comments about how his power, his glory, his messianic role would lead him into the hands of the religious elite, and that he would … not just die, but be killed. None of that made any sense. Further, it made no sense that Jesus said, if we're to follow him, if we're to be his disciples, if we're to really claim the teachings of God for faithful living, that we too would have to carry a cross, and would experience the same kind of public humiliation and shame, which would lead to *our* death.

None of that made sense. None of that checked the boxes for our understanding of what it meant for God to claim the divine power over the heavens and the earth. None of that reconciled with our understanding of Christ as the fulfillment of the prophets, who claimed that the Messiah would come to lead in God's glory.

And now, after a week of befuddled confusion, here we are, Peter, James, and John, standing on a mountain top with Jesus, and low and behold, his clothes begin to radiate in a white that is the whitest white of all time. And there, standing with Jesus, is Moses and Elijah. Jesus has been transfigured … and we don't even know what that means, but man, it is filled with images of glory and power.

And you have to imagine that the disciples – especially Peter – feel vindicated in making their claim of Jesus as the Messiah. You can imagine Peter witnessing all of this, and thinking, "SEE! I told you! This is what the messiah-ship is all about. This is the glory of which I was speaking. Don't tell me this man – this Messiah – this Lord – this Savior is going to suffer at the hands of the religious elite. That's bollywash. This. Is. Jesus. This is the radiating power of God."

Peter speaks up, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

The ever-present Eagle Scout, Peter is ready to thatch a hut and build a fire, and to sit and bask in this moment of glory with Jesus.

Before Jesus can respond, the sky became dark, and a voice called out from the heavens, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And in a moment's notice, Moses and Elijah were gone, the radiating glow of Jesus was gone, and it was just the four men standing in shadow of the clouds.

As if it were not bad enough that Peter had been rebuked by Jesus in the previous text, now Peter is being rebuked by God from the heavens.

It's clear that what Jesus had taught previously had not yet fully sunken in. The voice of God is calling them to remember what Jesus had said, "that rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection are integral to his messianic mission, and that the way of the cross is equally integral and inescapable for all who

would follow him."[ii] Nothing new is taught on the mountain top; instead, the disciples are reminded of the importance of what Jesus has already spoken.

In the verse following our passage this morning, as they are walking back down the mountain top, Jesus tells the three disciples not to say anything about what they experienced "until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead." It was a subtle, but important note, that helps us understand the instruction of God to "Listen to him." Jesus had already spoken his truth: Jesus will die, and he will be raised again.

We are called to listen to him. We need to hear this eternal truth. "Jesus did not die because his suffering as such could purge the world of sin and evil. He died because the powers of evil sought to destroy his witness to nonviolent love, justice, and truth."[iii] We cannot hail Jesus Christ as the Lord without understanding that claim in the context of Jesus' death and resurrection, in the "transforming power of divine love … that does not dominate and defeat evil so much as challenge, expose, and seek to transform it."[iv]

This is the proclamation of Christ as the Messiah, and this is the invitation to discipleship. We must listen to the Lord as he speaks, and witness as he lives this truth: the call to discipleship and the glory of the Lord is not one that leads with the power of empires, armies, and death … but is the witness of the love of God that challenges and stands up to empires, and that overcomes the threat of death with the proclamation of new life. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and all who follow are called to listen to him! May we heed his call, and fall in behind him, assured that no matter what violence the world may use on him, through Christ, God is offering salvation to all the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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[i] William C. Placher. *Mark: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
[ii] Rodney J. Hunter. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1.* Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.
[iii] Hunter.
[iv] Hunter.