

Three Truths & Three Warnings Mark 8:27-38

Mark proclaims the gospel with a sense of urgency and immediacy. Matthew fills in the narrative and rounds out the discussion, but Mark's tag line Gospel gives bullet points. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" They respond, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others one of the prophets." "But what about you?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Jesus warned, "Don't tell anyone."

The disciples were on a steep learning curve. Jesus is on the move, teaching, healing and driving out evil spirits. The gospel is proclaimed and embodied in Jesus, but no one seems to understand who he is or what all this means. The crowds are amazed and confused. The religious leaders are disturbed and threatened. The disciples are struggling to keep up with Jesus. Now in the second half of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem – to the cross with single-minded resolve.

The Confession and the Command to Silence

Caesarea Philippi is located at the base of Mount Hermon and the source of the headwaters of the Jordan river. This region is the northernmost border of Israel and the furthest point of Jesus' journey from Jerusalem. On the boundary between Israel and the world, Jesus asked the question. He deliberately set himself up against the background of the world's religions. The journey to Jerusalem begins in Caesarea Philippi with a question and a confession.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus blessed Peter and affirmed the source of Peter's insight, "for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (16:17). Mark records no blessing only a warning. The disciples were warned to keep silent because they did not understand the work of Christ. They got a title right, but missed the meaning. They envisioned a nationalistic Messiah who would come and throw out the Gentiles and restore the throne to Jerusalem. They got the confession right, but they didn't understand the commitment.

Mark's account implies that it is easy to get the confession right, but miss the meaning of Christ. Jesus makes a similar point at the end of the Sermon on the Mount when he said,

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Mat 7:21-23).

The Cross and the Rebuke

Jesus began to explain, "that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again."

The disciples were not expecting this. They had not linked Isaiah's Suffering Servant to the Messiah. No one imagined that Abel's sacrificial lamb or Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac or Israel's Passover

Lamb were types pointing to the sacrifice of the Anointed One. No one heard echoes of the Messiah in Job's cry, "I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand on the earth and after my skin has been destroyed yet in my flesh I will see him," or in David's prayer, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The connection had not been made between Jesus and Daniel's vision of the victorious Son of Man, or Zechariah's humble king, unappreciated Shepherd, and mourned martyr.

Salvation history moves toward the cross out of a necessity designed by the Lord of history. From Genesis to Revelation, the meaning of the cross and the mystery of the atonement unfold under the sovereign direction of God. We are prepared for the cross through images, events, allusions, symbols, parables, prophecies, and poetry. Every form, phase, type, and strata of the Bible points to the cross. The divine necessity is hidden in the course of human affairs. To those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, *history* testifies to the inevitability of the cross and God's revelation declares its meaning. *Salvation is woven into the very fabric of history.*

And as *history* moved toward the cross, *creation* moves toward the Resurrection. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of nature, as well. The history of God's revelation points to the cross, the nature of God's creation points to the resurrection. We are prepared for the resurrection through the "big bang," the language of DNA, the human quest for knowledge, the Periodic Table, mathematical patterns and formulas, the human capacity for beauty, the anthropic principle of the universe, the incredible complexity of the living cell, and the meaning of the human drama. The divine necessity of the resurrection is hidden in the mystery and complexity of nature. Creation testifies to the logical coherence and meaningful power of the resurrection. *God's revelation declares its meaning in the context of nature's wonder and human need. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of creation.*

But at this point the disciples did not understand this and for Jesus to teach that the Messiah, "must suffer," "be killed," and "after three days rise again," was beyond imagining. Peter pulled Jesus aside and began to rebuke Jesus. Peter got the confession right, but he pictured a "successful" Messiah. He did not know that Jesus came to "give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The Lord rebuked Peter. His critical response underscored the seriousness of Peter's heresy: "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

The terrible shock of all of this is hard to replicate. But perhaps one way to put ourselves in the disciples' place is to draw a connection between crucifixion and lynching. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery is dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow. More than 4,000 African American men, women, and children who were lynched between 1877 and 1950 are memorialized there.

"Both the cross and the lynching tree [are] symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution, reserved primarily for slaves, criminals, and insurrectionists – the lowest of the low in society. Both Jesus and blacks were publicly humiliated, subjected to the utmost indignity and cruelty. They were stripped, in order to be deprived of dignity, them paraded, mocked and whipped, pierced, derided and spat upon, tortured for hours in the presence of jeering crowds for popular entertainment" (James Cone).

But strangely African-American gospel preaching never linked the cross and the lynching tree. "The

lynching tree has no place in American theological reflections about Jesus' cross or in the proclamation of Christian churches about his Passion" (Cone, 30). I asked my gifted colleague Dr. Robert Smith, Jr., an African American known for his gospel preaching, why Black preaching has not drawn a connection between the cross and the lynching tree. He gave me three succinct reasons:

1) There is absolutely no redemption in lynching. There is nothing redemptive about it. The cross was in every sense, like lynching, utterly despicable, but for the African-American the cross speaks of redemption, lynching speaks of all that is evil in man.

2) There is absolutely no resurrection in lynching. There is no hope. There is no meaning. African-American preachers cannot preach about the cross without preaching about resurrection.

3) The only hope for the lynching tree – for those who suffered such brutality and violence and those who committed such atrocities – is the power of the cross and the hope of the resurrection.

The cross of Jesus and the lynching tree affirm the horror and the depth of human depravity and the necessity of the redemptive power of the cross and the resurrection of Christ to overcome evil, the sin of atrocities and the sin of the human heart.

The Commitment and the Warning

Jesus calls the crowd along with his disciples to emphasize the cost of discipleship. He gives public notice: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." It would be like Jesus calling your colleagues, peers, partners, and neighbors together to hear him say that he expects you to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him. This call to costly discipleship is inclusive of all believers. Jesus makes it "clear beyond all doubt that the 'must' of suffering applies to his disciples no less than to himself. . . . When Christ calls a person, he bids him or her to come and die. . . .it is the death of the old self" (Bonhoeffer).

Cross-bearing signals the death of the resentful self, the unforgiving self, the wilful self, the self-indulgent self. This self-renunciation is negative. Our old way of living must die. There is no way around this. A whole way of living must die, but such living is really not living at all. Idols are forsaken for the true object of worship. Self-denial is the way to self-fulfillment. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

The way of the cross is a lived experience. In the secular age we tend to live in our heads. "Modern enlightened culture is very theory-oriented. We tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings: of experience, of beauty, even the ethical" (A Secular Age, 555). The modern moral order is self-authorizing and self-authenticating. Charles Taylor calls this phenomenon *excarnation* (the opposite of incarnation). Instead of embodied truth, enfleshed in forms of character and action, we live in our heads. The excarnated ideals of the modern moral order are framed as immanent abstract ideals in a society of strangers each free to do their own thing.

When Duane Litfin was president of Wheaton College he was asked to offer the invocation at a secular academic gathering. Since he believes that "there is one mediator between God and human beings, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5), he prays in the name of Jesus. Aware of the current social climate and

the power of Jesus' name to divide, he did not want to put the convener in jeopardy. So he asked him, "Do you think it will be a problem in this gathering for me to pray in Jesus' name?" The convener thought for a moment and then replied that, yes, he thought that would be a problem. Litfin acknowledges that God has nowhere ordained that he must explicitly use those exact words, and in fact he does not always conclude his prayers that way. Yet here was a case where he was being asked to distance himself from Jesus for the sake of the sensibilities of others, and to acquiesce in that unspoken premise of American civil religion that stipulates that all ways to God are equally valid.

Litfin explains that he settled this dilemma in his own mind long ago. Suppose the convener had said to him, "Look, we want you to come to this meeting, but please do not bring your wife. Some at this gathering find her offensive. We're happy to have you, but please don't mention her name." What would he have done then? In the same way, this situation was requiring that he disassociate himself from the name of Jesus. He was being forced to choose, which meant that he had no choice at all, precisely because, as in his marriage, that choice was made long ago.

Jesus said, "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38).

The Fulani, a tribe of Muslim nomadic cattle herders in Nigeria have been collaborating with Boko Haram in Nigeria to attack Christian villages. Several hundred Christians were killed this summer. My colleague Gerry McDermott experienced this first-hand in July when he visited Bishop Kwashi and taught at the Anglican institute.

The Voice of the Martyrs recently reported the story of Abel, a Fulani Muslim who came to Christ (9/2018). One night a man dressed in white appeared to Abel in a dream. He said, "Turn away from Islam and follow me." When he awoke in the morning Abel remembered the dream but he had no idea what it meant. For the next three nights, the 28-year-old had the same dream.

Abel told his father about his dreams. His father called the dreams demonic and urged him to recite Muslim prayers. He followed his advice but the dreams persisted. He told a Christian friend who introduced him to his pastor. The pastor explained that Jesus is more than a prophet and he explained the dream. Jesus was calling Abel to follow him. He gave him a Bible and Abel began reading the Bible on his own.

After a time Abel placed his faith in Jesus. Eventually his father found out and told him to leave home because a Fulani Muslim could not have a Christian living in his home. Abel moved to another city but his family grew increasingly angry about his conversion to Christ. Eventually they kidnaped, brought him home, and locked him in a room. He was starved, beaten, and stabbed by his brothers. He probably would have died if his mother, heartbroken for her son, had not unlocked the door and set him free.

That was over ten years ago. Today, Abel is discipling other Christian converts from Islam at a training center. He is teaching and encouraging them not to be ashamed of Christ and his words in this adulterous and sinful generation.

No one finds Jesus' Cross easy. To the world, the message of the cross is foolishness, "but to us who

are being saved, it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). The holy and just God took upon himself the judgment we deserve. He vicariously assumed our role as sinner in order to turn away his just wrath. He who knew no sin was made sin for us (2 Cor 5:21).

We have come to believe that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

We confess, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). The work of the cross is a finished work. Christ sacrificed for our sins “once and for all when he offered himself” (Heb 7:27; 1 Pet 3:18). The believer is committed to taking up his or her cross and following Jesus.

It is one thing to believe in the cross of Christ; it is another thing to take up your cross and follow Jesus. “To this [we] were called, because Christ suffered for us, leaving [us] an example, that [we] should follow in his steps (1 Pet 2:21).

Accepting the cross of Christ is not a passive act. It is a personal, passionate public commitment to become like Jesus. Cross-bearing means obedience to everything that Jesus and the gospel of the kingdom stands for. Self-denial means following a course of action empowered by God’s grace and determined by the gospel. “A church which preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross.” (Lausanne Covenant).