

“Crucified Messiah” – Mark 8:31-38 – February 28, 2021

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On this second Sunday in the Season of Lent we come to a turning point in the Gospel of Mark. In the first half the ministry of Jesus included preaching, teaching, feeding, and healing. He had gained a band of 12 disciples and multiple other followers, who were forming in their own minds a definition for who Jesus was. Prior to this passage, Jesus asked his disciples who the people thought he was. And then he asked who they thought he was. Peter spoke up, no doubt professing what all the others secretly hoped in their hearts, and said to Jesus, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus then told the disciples to keep that quiet and not tell others about him. And then we come to today’s scripture lesson.

But first, let us understand what Messiah, or the Anointed One, means. For the Jewish people, the expectation was that Messiah would come as a powerful ruler like King David. He would wield power and might, bringing armies to defeat the foes of Israel, returning Israel to its former position of glory. Messiah would deliver the people out of their submissive place in the Roman Empire. They would be a strong and mighty nation.

That was the expectation. And prior to the arrival of Jesus, other men rose up among the Israelites with visions of rebellion, returning Israel to its rightful place. Each came with a message of fighting against their oppressors and defeating those who kept them in a place of submission. But each of them failed, and the people saw them as false Messiahs. But now their hopes were kindled again. Jesus had the look and seemed to fit their expectations.

But then he told the disciples something horrifying. His journey would lead to suffering and death. He also mentioned resurrection on the third day, but all they could hear was the first two words – suffering and death. And, to the disciples, that was impossible. If Jesus was the Messiah, the true Messiah, Israel would be powerful again with an invincible king. Peter expressed the shock they all were feeling, took Jesus aside, and rebuked Jesus. But Jesus turned to his disciples, including them in his response, because he knew they felt what Peter had expressed. He referred to Peter as Satan, because the temptation to grab power was a real one. Jesus could have taken that path. He will struggle again in the Garden of Gethsemane with a similar temptation.

He told them all that their focus was on things of this earth, earthly success and power and prestige. The divine focus is on a very different path. One of raising up the marginalized, championing the poor and downtrodden, and confronting the powers, not with a sword, but with resolve. And this path would naturally lead him to a place of suffering, because those in power did not want to give up their power. Then Jesus addressed the crowds who had followed him, instructing them to take up their cross and deny themselves.

Many of the people that Jesus was addressing were themselves powerless and marginalized, struggling to survive day to day. The image of the cross was threatening. It represented the power of Rome – it was device of torture and death. It was a frightening image that kept people

in their place. It was a terrifying symbol, not only for those who dared to cross those in power, but also their followers. For those who chose to follow Jesus, it was a very real threat.

Here the message of the good news of the gospel wasn't so good. Jesus was a Messiah who willingly choose to suffer, he willingly took a path of peaceful resistance over worldly might. He modeled a life that pursued justice and compassion and sacrificial love. Jesus' message expressed God's forgiveness of sins, mercy to all people, and grace that God's love for us is freely given. Jesus stayed true to this message even when it threatened his own life. He showed us that God's love is not found in the power of force and domination; God's love is manifest in solidarity with the downtrodden and compassion for the suffering.

So how does this message play out for us? For the most part we are pretty comfortable in the world, we may know of those who struggle to experience the type of wholeness that God desires for all people, but we can navigate our own lives without much difficulty. When we do have challenges, we can generally find workable solutions to regain stability.

So then our responsibility as followers of Jesus, is to recognize the inequalities and inequities that exist for others. We certainly do have the option of ignoring the struggles of other people. We can listen to horrible stories of violence and oppression against types and groups of people, but when it gets to be too much for us to bear, we can turn our attention elsewhere. We have the ability to ignore it, because we don't have to experience for ourselves.

I think what Jesus would tell us is that we can not continue living a life of ignorance to the plight of others. Our task is to do the work of making change happen. There are systems in place in our society and in our world that intentionally put others in the path of suffering and hardship. Those systems need to be dismantled. There are people in our own neighborhoods who suffer injustice. What can we do to make changes happen? That is the work we are called to do.

Like Peter we may want to say, come on, Jesus, just use a little of your power to make everything good again. Why do I need to risk my own way of life to do your work of love and compassion for others? Can't you just make it happen? That would sure make things a lot easier.

But unfortunately life doesn't work that way. We have to figure it out. And we have to choose how to live. We have choices on a daily basis that impact others. How can we make sure our choices, our actions, are aligned with the message of the gospel? And how can we intentionally seek out the good for those who are suffering? As we draw closer to Jesus Christ, studying his words to us and letting his love fill us, we will better know how to follow him on our journey of faith. Let us do the work that he set before us. Let us follow his lead in love and compassion for all. May it be so.