Setting Jesus Straight

MARK 8:31-38 (NRSVUE) ***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 wish to come after me, 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, 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 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."***

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Last week's gospel reading recounted Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We didn't elaborate on the temptations, but I can't help noticing how closely Peter's expectation of Jesus lines up with those temptations. And Jesus' response is the same: "Get behind me, Satan!" He called Peter Satan!

Part of what leaves us scratching our heads is that just two verses prior to the beginning of this reading, Peter has declared Jesus to be the Messiah! But then Jesus begins to explain what that means. Jesus' understanding of what it meant to be the Jewish Messiah was taken from Isaiah's servant songs which, when put together end-to-end include the inevitability of suffering and death.

Peter had a different idea, and when Peter objects, Jesus calls him Satan! Obviously, there's a misconnect here somewhere.

When we look at Mark's literary style, we see themes running throughout his gospel. One such theme is established in last week's reading of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The nature of those three temptations is consistently revisited by Mark, especially in the debates between Jesus and the Jewish oligarchy (not to be confused with Jews in general), and clearly during the last weeks of Jesus' ministry. It's like bookends that sandwich Jesus' life and ministry between these secular power models that form the common expectations of Messiah.

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." "'IF' you're the Son of God…" In the original language, the Greek particle takes the statement at face value, implying, not a conjecture but a reality already in place. Elsewhere in the gospels it's translated "since:" "Since you are the Son of God…" The issue is not whether Jesus is Son of God, but what it means for him to be Son of God.

One Jewish teaching was that Messiah would reproduce the miracle of manna from the Israelite wanderings in the wilderness during the exodus. "Since you're the Son of God… Let's just test that. Do you have the power? Do you qualify?" And then:

Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

You won't even stub your toe! What a great way to prove you're the Son of God! You'll have the people eating out of the palm of your hand!"

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory—like Moses when God took him to the top of Mt. Nebo and let him see the glories of the Promised Land—***"All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."*** The temptation is for power: to rule the kingdoms of the world, to assume the role presently played by the Roman Empire, and to adopt the same power strategies of the world's kingdoms.

These temptations follow Jesus throughout Mark's gospel and are implied in today's reading: the first of three times Jesus predicts his passion. Peter takes him aside and rebukes him: "Come on, man! Messiah doesn't die like that! Messiah is the great provider! Messiah has super powers! Messiah is a great warrior and ruler!"

And Jesus says, ***"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."***

There's always been a gap between who humans think Jesus should be and who Jesus is. The gap takes different forms as we move between Christian denominations. It was so in Jesus' time, too; each Jewish sect with a different idea about who Messiah would be and what Messiah would do.

All we want is for God to be God the way we would be God if we were God.

Spoiler alert: we're not God! Often, what humans think is impossible or absurd is precisely God's intention. Every reading in today 's Lectionary makes that point:

In Genesis 17, God reaffirms the promise that Abraham will be the ancestor of many nations. But he and Sarah were childless, getting on in years. They assume God needs help, so they devise a human plan. As was acceptable in that time Sarah assigned her maid, Hagar, to bear children with Abraham. And so, Ishmael was born.

But that wasn't God's plan. And so, Sarah, long past hot flashes, got pregnant. Isaac was born. Isaac fathered Jacob, whose twelve sons became the forebears of the twelve tribes of Israel. It seemed impossible—even absurd—but God did what God promised. But God did it God's way.

Today's Psalm celebrates that improbable story of Abraham and Sarah, and proclaims that God's blessing for all people is extended even for those "yet unborn."

In the epistle reading, Paul extends the "yet unborn" to include not only those who are physical and genetic offspring of Abraham but all who have faith like Abraham. Abraham's story is a prototypical example of God's faithful but mysterious ways. God creates, God relates, God makes and keeps promises, all in ways not

subject to the expectations or control of human beings.

So, Jesus' prediction of his death at the hands of the Jewish oligarchy doesn't fit Peter's expectation, so he takes Jesus aside to set him straight.

And Jesus says, ***"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."***

Three times in Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) Jesus predicts his "Passion," and each time there's a level of misunderstanding among the disciples, and each time Jesus follows up by teaching about the nature of true discipleship.

Divine things? Human things? True discipleship?

I looked up the answer in the back of the book. Jesus' prediction of his passion is not so much a demonstration of some psychic, crystal ball super power as it is a declaration of what it means to be to be Son of God, or by extension, what it means to be a disciple of the Son of God—how Isaiah describes any servant of God who chooses to proclaim, promote, and live out God's promise of being a blessing for all nations of the earth, and what it means includes taking up a cross.

It means (Luke 4:18-19) "to bring good news to the poor… to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It means (Matt. 5:39) "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, It means (Matt. 5:44) "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"

It means (Matt. 25:35-36) feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger (**ξενος** > xenophobia: alien; immigrant ~ cf. 18 times in the Hebrew Scriptures), to clothe the naked, to care for the sick and to visit those unjustly imprisoned"'

It means speaking truth to power—getting in the face of Pharisees and corrupt priests whose power and authority are not from God but from their collusion with the empire….

And when you do that, there will be a cross, because power does not know humility or compassion. Power does not seek truth (Pilate didn't know what truth is!) nor does it seek justice; it seeks only more power.

The cross isn't a prerequisite for anything; it's not part of some eternal plan; God didn't set up God's son as a human sacrifice for sinful humanity, as many will argue. The cross isn't necessary for the accomplishment of God's purposes; but it is inevitable, given the nature of the life and ministry of Jesus. And he said, "If you're going to follow me—if you're going to be my disciple—get ready for a cross.

I'm not sure I'm ready. I'm working on it. I guess that's what Lent is all about.

Invitation to the Table

Today's Gospel reading reports the first of three times Jesus told his Disciples he must suffer and die. Peter rebuked him, wishing it were not so. Jesus tells Peter "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but human things." It's human and natural to not want to see Jesus suffering. It's human to want him near us—in our consciousness—in our awareness.

We humans still don't understand God's ways, which is why one source says there are more than 45,000 Christian denominations globally and more than 200 in the United States; and, while some are antagonistic toward each other, none of us can fully make sense of what God has done in Jesus Christ. We just have to trust.

So, because God did what was beyond human imagination and understanding, we come to this table trusting the divine way; and we say, "Thank you."

Pastoral Prayer

God of mercy and grace, thank you for receiving us as your children. Give us grace so that we don't fail to extend the same hospitality you show us: when we are tempted to look away from those in need on the streets; when we drive through run-down neighborhoods without considering our impact; when we rationalize a sense of powerless to do anything. Call us away from comfortable ignorance and into the work of radical hospitality. Remind us of our interconnectedness and our interdependence with all your children.

God of Transformation, as we near the edge of winter and begin to move into spring, we know that you always are making all things new. Our part of the earth soon will become bright and beautiful, and already we see hints of your faithfulness through the seasons of your creation that are always changing yet always the same.

In our own lives when we face struggles and challenges that dim our vision, remind us that even when life seems dreary and cold and we can't envision any warmth or brightness in life in this world, we can trust in your promises.

Remind us that you can lead us from bleakness into light; from into hope; from mourning into dancing.

Even when we can't comprehend joy in a given moment, we know it will return, for You are a God worthy of praise and glory, and You have made us in Your image, awesome and wonderful. Grant us grace to know that you already give us what we need to move through the darkness into your light. Lead us, in this season of Lent, to discover and acknowledge some strength we never knew we had.

All this we are bold to pray because we are disciples of Christ who is the light of the world. Amen