

First Scripture Reading Mark 8:27-38

Second Scripture Reading 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

They say that when you add up all of the days accounted for in the Gospels you only get about a year's worth of material. That means that for every day that we know about there are two we do not. We have contained within the Gospel accounts only a fraction of the whole adult ministry of Jesus. While some of these are doubtlessly ordinary and routine days, like laundry day or more fishing, or days of just endlessly walking, we know that during His whole life on earth Jesus was continually pouring out His grace. Even these routine and ordinary days were essentially parts of His ministry. So, given how few stories we have from Jesus' life and ministry, we must assume that the authors of the four Gospels had a purpose in the construction of their Gospels. They were not haphazardly tossing in every story they could recall, just making sure to have the passion and resurrection narrative at the end. Within the Gospels we find intricate stories of Christ woven together, not only to tell us what kind of miracles He performed but also to explain who He was. Within the construction of Mark, the author is telling us who they say Jesus is! Mark is recalling this question, who do you say that I am, and providing an answer not only within this narrative but with his entire Gospel, proclaiming this is who Jesus is.

It is for this reason we find our story this morning bookended by two accounts of Jesus healing the blind, first earlier in chapter 8 and then another in chapter 10. Within these two miraculous accounts of Jesus healing the blind, with our reading in between, Mark is not only saying, look how many blind people Jesus healed, and oh yeah He also said some stuff too, but seriously here is another story of Jesus healing a blind man. No, Mark is illustrating for his reader before we even get to our story this morning, that Jesus can heal our blindness. It is this component to who Jesus is that gives meaning to the rest of the narrative. It is this Jesus who

gives sight to those who are physically blinded and illumination to those walking through darkness. It is this Jesus who has the power to heal the blindness of humankind, the blindness of His own followers.

Where we come into the text, Jesus is with His disciples, on the way towards Caesarea Philippi. And all of a sudden Jesus asks them “Who do people say that I am”. His disciples respond by saying, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets”. Jesus begins His line of questioning, to His disciples by asking them, who do the people say that I am, who does the world say that I am? Jesus begins by asking His disciples how does the world see me, according to the world, who am I? The answer that Jesus receives is equating Him to prophets who spoke the Word of God to the people of Israel, who announced God’s salvific history. The people understand Jesus as just another prophet, it is fascinating that they have this role that they feel comfortable placing Jesus within. Jesus is clearly so much more than any prophet, but the people are comfortable placing Him within this office that they know, one that makes sense to them, one that does not challenge them. We can wonder if this is the closest thing the people could understand as to who Jesus actually is, but then why would the Disciples know any better? If we were to contemporize their response we may say that they saw Jesus along the lines of MLK, Dietrich Bonhoeffer or even Mr. Rogers, speaking God’s word for the world that needed to hear it. But as impressive as the prophetic office is, this is not who Christ is. Jesus certainly spoke prophetically, and we cannot deny that is a part of who He is, but that is an incomplete answer.

The world that we live in, now, in the west, is so often defined by its pluralistic stance to religion. Anything goes. It is a world in which all are able to make claims about truth, so long as they do not interfere with the truth claims of another. It is in this world, that the Church struggles

to find it's relevance in this new age. We are given these small niches where we are allowed to exist with our truth claims, but societal norms restrict proclaiming the Gospel message outside of private life. For the most part the Protestant Church has accepted this limited role. It has accepted a distinction, where we can and cannot proclaim who we know Jesus to be. We have accepted a limit to those who need to hear about who we know Jesus to be, and that limit is those who have already heard, to those who are already in our churches. The Church has found its relevance in not trying to break from the limited role that it has been given.

So many people in our world see religions as all being the same. I doubt that I am the only one who has heard that before. All religions are saying the same thing, and if you look past all of the hard line dogma they are all just the same things revolving the same thing. They see Jesus as a religious leader among so many others who gives some useful hints for living life, but nothing more. Jesus is only a prophet, like John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Buddha or Mohammed, nothing more. As the world watches conflicts which seem to be driven by doctrinal differences, I can understand why this answer would satisfy many. The world we live in is content to see all religions as being theocentric, with God existing at the center of all, tying them all together. The God of this worldview is disconnected from the affairs of humankind, and we only ever know this God, ever so slightly by a few eccentric prophets. This is a very harmonious way of seeing a world that is anything but, and for those outside of the faith I can understand the temptation. I can understand the continued desire to place Jesus within a comfortable label, as another prophet who speaks to a truth shared by all. That Jesus is tame, that Jesus is a Jesus that can be approached without commitment, without rejecting all other claims to truth. But that is not who Jesus has revealed Himself to be.

There are those, even within the faith who would label Jesus as nothing more than a mouthpiece for God. They are blinded by their desire for a more peaceful and just world, to simply see Jesus as the messenger, apart from God. They are so blinded by their desire for justice within the world that they would place Christ among the great revolutionaries of our age. For them, Jesus and Christianity finds its relevance in the social implications. The Good News for them is contained within any social movement which brings forth a more just and equal world. For them Jesus is a prophet of the social revolution, along with Gandhi or Marx, sent to change the world. In a world where the Church seems to be increasingly irrelevant, I can understand their motivations. I can understand why people in the Church would want to find a way to hold onto...something...anything, just a piece of the faith, and make it relevant for the new world we find ourselves within.

But neither Jesus as the prophet, pointing us towards some abstract and distant God, shared at the center of all faith traditions nor Jesus the social revolutionary are the Christ who we know. The Jesus the world knows is the Jesus who fits into offices that are comfortable, offices which allow us to talk about Him as something other than the Christ. But this Jesus who is nothing more than a few maxims to live by, or the Jesus who is only committed to social justice causes is not the Christ we know. Jesus is a prophet and Jesus does proclaim justice to the oppressed, but neither of these capture who Jesus truly is. These answers do not impress Jesus. These answers do not satisfy Jesus, Jesus does not end His line of questioning by accepting the world's blindness.

We as the Church continue to exist in a world which denies the true identity of Christ, a world which sees Christ as a prophet speaking to us from a distant God. We find ourselves in a world which undermines the identity of the Church and the mission of the Church. By continuing

to define Jesus. We find ourselves within a world that has defined what is proper and what is effective, and been told that the Gospel message falls short. For those who are blind to who Christ is, the Gospel centered on Christ on the cross, is indeed foolishness. This Christocentric understanding, is declared foolish by all the quasi-intellectuals who continue to see us as just more of the same unenlightened dogmatic followers. It is in this world, the same world that the Disciples knew, that we find ourselves being the ones answering Christ's question, "Who do you say that I am", along with Peter shouting, "You are the Messiah". In this instance, Peter cannot help but blurt out not just for himself but for the twelve, indeed for the entire Church in every time and place, saying you are the messiah, you are the Christ. We the foolish, the weak, the lowly and despised, chosen by God to keep shouting this in a blind world. To keep saying, that even as the world defines you in one way, through blindness, we know who You are. The text begins by naming Jesus as the Christ, by asserting in a world which denies His rightful title, that Jesus is the Messiah. The rest of the passage hinges on this initial assertion of who we know Christ to be, not on who the world defines Him to be. The statements that Jesus goes on to make about Himself and the life of His followers hinge on this vital pronouncement in a blind world, in a world that needs to see Jesus for who He truly is. This is the Good news of the Gospel that Peter cannot help but announce to all who can hear, that Jesus is not only a prophet, but that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ for us, the God we can touch.

As the text continues, we are told that Jesus begins to teach them about what He must undergo. Within the Greek is contained not only the imperative but the divine necessity, not only is this a foretelling of what will happen, or what must happen, but Jesus is proclaiming what the will of God is. He is defining for His disciples, who just announced his messiahship for the first time in the Gospel of Mark, what that truly means. Jesus as the Christ is the one who will be

rejected, tortured, killed but He is also the one who has the power after three days to rise again, it is the will of God, to fulfill the salvific history that has been the will of God forever. Throughout the Gospel of Mark we typically get Jesus shrouded in mystery, ordering all those who experience the grace His presence provides, to secrecy. Even within this passage Jesus tells Peter to tell no one about His identity as the Messiah. But when Jesus is describing the divine necessity of His death, and His resurrection the author tells us that Jesus said all this quite openly. It is at this moment when the disciples now cannot help but blurt out who they know Jesus to be, that Jesus begins to teach them about His atoning death, openly.

It is within this moment of openness, which is so uncharacteristic for Jesus, that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him. Mark does not tell us exactly what was said, whether Peter could not understand the necessity of Jesus' death and resurrection, or whether the death of the man whom he recognized as the Messiah did not fulfill the hopes he had for his people, trampled underfoot by foreign foes, or if he simply could not stand the thought of losing the man closest to him. If he simply could not imagine seeing Jesus suffering and being killed. The text does not tell us what motivated Peter's rebuke, whether it was theological, or personal. Either way Peter, who just a few verses earlier gave the first proclamation of the Good News, now is rebuking Jesus over what that Good News is. Just a few verses earlier, Peter spoke what was on the tongue of each disciple, said the word that until now they did not say, Messiah. And now Peter is saying what probably was on all of their minds, so Jesus turns to His disciples and says "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things".

Peter has arrogated himself to a position where he thinks that he can divert Jesus from His path. Whether he is motivated by, be it his understanding about what his people need, or grief brought on by imagining the loss of his friend, he has tried to exercise authority he did not

have. Peter is still blind, still in need of healing so he can understand what Messiah truly means. Jesus can only tell him, and any of the disciples who do not understand, to get behind Him, to understand their place within the body gathered and led by Christ. Even Jesus' closest disciples who know who He is, are still blinded, they are blinded and cannot understand the divine necessity, the will of God. The disciples still have their minds on human things, but as we know from what Mark is trying to tell us, Jesus can heal this blindness, Jesus can heal the blindness of the world who does not know Him, and the blindness of His Church.

Then turning to this crowd that has gathered around Him, Christ makes His clearest statement. Christ announces that anyone who wants to follow Him must take up their cross and follow Him, they must deny themselves and take up the greatest form of humiliation, this political instrument for torturous execution and follow Christ. The only way to achieve wholeness within the economy that Christ is presenting is to relinquish everything, to empty yourself of human things, to take upon yourself only the gospel hope, the gospel paradox. That by laying your life down before the cross, by taking up your own cross, your own discipleship, you find your greatest purpose in life. By placing the humiliation of Christ, at the center of your life, you find your complete wholeness. Offering up your entire life, with all of its human motivations, to God, laying down all of yourself before the foot of the cross, brings you wholeness that only God can provide.

This is what Christ promises at the end of this passage, not riches, not an easy life, none of that, what Jesus promises to give those of us whose blindness constantly needs to be healed, is our lives redeemed in the image of the cross, and sanctified in the resurrection. And this is the relevance the Church finds for today. That it does not matter how dusty our hymnals may be, no matter how outdated the carpets in our sanctuary may look, our future lies on Jesus our Christ.

Our future relies on the life, and the wholeness that only Christ can provide. Our future relies on the Gospel paradox, that the world needs to hear over and over again.