

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 8, 2009 – Annual Congregational Meeting**

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Romans 4: 13-25; **Mark 8: 31-38**

### **DYING FOR LIFE**

Mark 8 is a kind of theological fork in the road. This chapter is the hinge of Mark's gospel. Not only is this the exact middle of Mark in terms of chapters and verses, it is also theologically the center point at which the ministry of Jesus takes a decisive turn toward the cross. Jesus seems to know what he is doing and also where he is going – where he must go whether he wants to go that direction or not. For the disciples, however, Mark 8 does present a kind of fork in the road. And as they look at the fork in the road, they want to take both paths. They want to stick with Jesus and be his followers while at the same time insisting that Jesus follow them down the path they want to take. They want it both ways.

They want to follow Jesus, they really do. Suddenly, however, it looks like Jesus is intent on taking the proverbial "road less traveled," a path that is going the opposite direction of where the disciples want to go. Couldn't they be disciples – followers – of Jesus and still arrive at the place toward which they thought they had been heading all along?

When Jesus taught his disciples about his impending death, everything he said had little or no meaning for his disciples. Peter rebuked him because he still did not understand the kind of Messiah Jesus came to be. In a sense, he was yet one more temptation in the way Jesus had chosen. Israel did not have any concept of a suffering Messiah. The standard view was that of a messianic king who would achieve a military victory over Israel's enemies and bring in a golden age of peace and prosperity.

It was confusing to hear Jesus say that soon he'd be rejected, scorned, and killed. He also said that after three days he would rise again from the dead, but by the time he got to that part, the disciples were hardly even hearing Jesus anymore. This prediction of suffering and death sent the disciples into a tizzy. Suddenly there was a kind of roaring in their ears as their hearts and minds rebelled against what Jesus was saying.

In the preceding verses Peter had answered one of history's most powerful questions correctly – he identified Jesus as the Christ. Jesus' reaction in the other gospels is one of enthusiasm and praise – he blesses Peter. Mark's spare style omits such detail but it's fair to say that Peter was a kind of leader among the disciples, in part because of how he had named Jesus Messiah and how Jesus had blessed him for it. So Peter intervenes when Jesus explains about the path he is to take and the path they must choose as his followers.

And this time Mark tells exactly how Jesus reacts: "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God!" Peter goes from praise to reprimand – from being blessed to being cursed – in pretty short order it seems.

What went wrong? Well, the disciples had been yearning for the moment when Jesus would *make his move* and start a more public assault on the powers that be. And if he really is the Christ of God it was only a matter of time. But how could Jesus make anyone's life better by having his own life end? Jesus' proposal for dealing with this life's woes seems counter-intuitive, the exact opposite of how most people operate. Yet Jesus goes on to tell everyone this very plainly and simply. "If you want to get behind me, then you've got to give up clutching at this life, go under the sentence of death by having a cross-bar draped over your shoulders, and just die."

To save your life, you must lose it, if you lose your life for Christ, you save it. Just as we say we "lose ourselves" in our work, our art, our passions, our music, our spouse – Christ wants us to lose ourselves... in him – in discipleship. We need to be less afraid of death and more concerned about life that is not focused on the death and resurrection of Christ. God gives new life if we are willing to die to our old life.

Jesus is concerned about us – about our lives – about that mysterious but undeniable spiritual center of who we are as marvelously complex creatures made in the image of God. And what Jesus tells us about our lives is an apparent paradox. What we all want is to hang on to the life we've got. Diminishment, despair, and death are what we all rather dearly want to avoid; most of us – on most days – most of the time – like being alive.

We enjoy a good laugh. We savor good food. We appreciate the beauty of creation. We feel satisfied when we've done some task really well. We'd give almost anything to keep on watching our children and grandchildren mature. We're intrigued by the idea of life's having a *next*, a new horizon with new possibilities, new things to explore. The notion that there might not be another day for us – that there may not be another horizon – is what can rather quickly induce a marrow-chilling fear and a desire to head off whatever it is that threatens our being able to go along pretty much the way we always have.

We don't want life to end, which is why, when Jesus predicts his own end, Peter tries to shout Jesus down: "Don't talk that way, Jesus! If you're the Messiah, then you've got to save your own life first of all so that you can save and then improve the lot of our lives, too!" But no, when Jesus comes to the fork in the road he has to choose and he chooses to go another way.

During Lent we are reminded in a poignant manner that the whole of the Christian life is an encounter with a fork in the road. Life is all about making choices, and we each of us sooner or later reveal ourselves as the sum of our choices. In Lent we ponder the choice Jesus made. In the ears of most people then and now, Peter's suggestion that Jesus steer clear of sacrifice would make

eminent sense. Jesus' brief glance back at the other disciples may well mean he felt the allure and the tug of the path Peter was steering Jesus toward. But we know what Jesus chose instead. If we want to get behind Jesus as a disciple, then we need to be quite intentional in traveling the path he marks out for us – a path of life that comes from death.

Listen to these words from Julia Esquivel:

**I Am Not Afraid of Death<sup>1</sup>**

I am no longer afraid of death,  
I know well its dark and cold corridors  
leading to life.

I am afraid rather of that life  
which does not come out of death  
which cramps our hands  
and retards our march.

I am afraid of my fear  
and even more of the fear of others,  
who do not know where they are going,  
who continue clinging  
to what they consider to be life  
which we know to be death!

I live each day to kill death;  
I die each day to beget life,  
and in this dying unto death,  
I die a thousand times and  
am reborn another thousand  
through that love  
from my People,  
which nourishes hope!

**Amen.**

This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Esquivel, *Threatened with Resurrection*