

If It Weren't for Jesus

Mark 8:27-38

Leigh Campbell-Taylor

Newnan Presbyterian Church, Newnan, Georgia

Mark's Gospel is the oldest gospel, so that, as the first written narrative of the life of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark became major source material for the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke. Some scholars even see those two later writers as aiming to "correct" Mark's account; at minimum, they expanded it. One passage that really shows this enlarging of a particular episode is Mark's telling of The Temptation of Jesus. Mark gives it to us straight—one sentence: Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on Him." Period. Enough said. Well, apparently not for Matthew and Luke, each of whom devotes multiple paragraphs to dramatizing a spectacular showdown between the devil and Jesus: "Turn this stone into bread." "One does not live by bread alone." "Serve me and all earthly power will be yours." "Serve only God." "Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple for God will surely catch you." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." It's great stuff. But Mark lacks all of that. Mark simply states that Jesus was "tempted by Satan"; we get no juicy details, no smack-down replies. Until now. In today's text we have what can be read as Take Two of how Mark tells "The Temptation of Jesus."

Jesus is on a roll: He has banished demons and walked on water, stilled storms and healed countless people; He has fed 5,000 and He has fed 4,000, and He has ticked off the religious authorities at every turn. He's like a rock star. Jesus has fast become a legend in His own time. But being a legend is not what Jesus is about. And so He does a reality check with those closest to Him: "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples answer, and you can almost see them watching Him out of the corner of their eyes, hoping to catch some secret smile that will tell them they're getting warm: "John the Baptist...? Elijah...? One of the prophets...?" And then comes Jesus' follow-up question: "And who do you say that I am?" And Peter's hand shoots up like he's Hermione Granger in Potions class with Harry Potter, "Ooh Ooh! I know, I know! You're the Messiah." Bingo.

Then, blammo: Jesus starts talking about suffering, rejection, death. And so Peter "rebukes" Him: "Hang on, Jesus. You're the Messiah! The conquering king we've been waiting for since forever. So, not now, Jesus. You'll ruin everything." Poor Peter; he reminds me of a friend who once groaned, "You know, if it weren't for Jesus, being a Christian would be a whole lot easier."

Poor Peter; Jesus really clobbers him: "Get behind me, Satan." That, of course, is where the temptation theme comes into play. In this presentation of it, the temptation of Jesus has to do with that sticky weakness of succumbing to human priorities: be the messiah that people want, Jesus, rather than the Messiah that God intends. "Come on, Jesus"—Peter might have said—"Don't make it hard. The world wants a legend, a rock star, a conquering-king messiah; what the world doesn't want is a suffering, rejected, shamefully executed messiah."

But Jesus isn't here to pander to what the world wants. That temptation is easy for Jesus to resist. And so, for poor Peter, things go from bad to worse. With Peter

standing there dumbstruck, arms crossed, eyes stinging, Jesus turns to the entire crowd. And suddenly, not only is Jesus speaking of His own rocky, thorny road. He's now insisting that anyone who would be His disciple must also walk that road. Jesus tells the crowd that disciples are to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow after Him.

In the context of Lent, we tend to hear the word “deny” and think of giving up treats for six dreary weeks. In fact—and this is absolute fact—at last Thursday's lunch to celebrate the birthdays of our Church Secretary and Financial Secretary, when birthday dessert was being passed around the table, I actually heard the Rev. Dr. Harry Barrow say to a colleague, “Get behind me, Satan.” For the record, Harry successfully resisted the temptation at hand. That's the sort of thing we think of when we hear the word “deny.” Now, this is to take nothing away from Lenten disciplines—I have my own and they are useful practices—but for right now, rather than thinking of those give-it-up-for-Lent things when you hear Jesus' instructions “*deny* yourself,” instead translate the word to *disown*. “*Disown* yourself.” Now, put that together with Jesus' words to Peter, “For you are focusing not on divine concerns but on human concerns.” Disown human concerns. Jesus is telling us to disown our selves—our concerns, our priorities—and to focus instead on God's concerns.

Simone Weil, a secular Jew who converted to Christianity, once wrote, “If there is a God, it is not an insignificant fact, but something that requires a radical rethinking of every little thing. Your knowledge of God can't be considered as one fact among many. You have to bring all the other facts into line with the fact of God.” So, if we, when confronted with Jesus' question “Who do you say that I am?”—if we are going to answer with Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Messiah of God's divine intent, not just some human-wish-list messiah—for us to join that claim, we have to come to grips with how God contradicts our expectations, how God's priorities differ from our impulses, and how, thanks be to God, God's view of sinners is more merciful than ours.

Tomorrow, the State of Georgia is set to kill Kelly Gissendaner. This execution was scheduled for last Wednesday, but the weather prompted a five-day delay, and so we're wrestling through this sermon on the eve of the execution rather than after it's already a done deal. This case has been getting extra media attention because Kelly Gissendaner is a woman. And she will be the first woman executed in Georgia since 1944, when the State killed Lena Baker (who has since been exonerated). But the thing about this situation that demands our attention isn't that Kelly Gissendaner is a woman, is it? Isn't it that Kelly Gissendaner is scheduled to be *killed*? I mean, when we take someone's life, we are focusing on human priorities not on God's priorities. We are following an itch for vengeance instead of following Jesus. We are denying God's justice rather than denying our selves. And we are accepting something that would be a whole lot easier to accept if it weren't for Jesus. You see, long before He Himself was a victim of state-sponsored execution, Jesus once had the opportunity to participate in an execution. And, ironically enough for us here in 2015 Georgia, the criminal was a woman. More to the point, she had been caught in a capital crime. The religious law was clear. It said to stone the adulteress! But, standing there in the presence of Jesus, her accusers, her judge and jury, can't do it. If it weren't for Jesus, they could have. If it weren't for Jesus, her life would have been taken rather than transformed.

Saying this, I have to acknowledge that many of you may disagree with it, and I rely on you to receive this as an invitation to thoughtful, faithful conversation about an issue that truly matters. You are not called to agree with me. Instead, you—we—are called to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses, and follow Jesus.

That's a challenge that even St. Peter struggled with, but I pray it's made easier by something that Peter seems to have missed in his rush to define his messiah rather than listen to him. When Jesus talks of suffering, being rejected, dying and rising again, Peter apparently doesn't hear that final item: suffer, be rejected, be killed, *rise again*? Peter gets bogged down in the early steps of that sequence, letting them blot out the ultimate point. And I'll confess I've tended to do sort of the same thing with the sequence of instructions that Jesus delivers to all of us: deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me. I'll confess I've gotten bogged down in the early steps—deny myself, pick up my cross, and follow. I've gotten bogged down in "What if that's too hard?" Which isn't a silly concern—I mean, Jesus is, after all, talking about suffering and rejection and death. But what if I focus not on myself as follower, but on Jesus, the One to be followed. That's the gift. We're not just following human priorities; we get to follow Jesus. We're not wandering around on our own, without hope or direction. We are following Jesus. In other words, God is out there ahead of us, already creating and redeeming and sustaining. To participate in that, even at our finite human level, we are to deny, disown ourselves and take up our crosses and follow. And, to be clear, Church, you're already doing some of that. When you volunteer your time, when you contribute your money, even simply being here on Sunday morning is a disowning of human priorities in favor of divine priorities. And tomorrow, would you join in praying for everyone touched by the crime and by the punishment of Kelly Gissendaner? I believe Jesus will be doing that; I hope we will follow His lead. Because when we follow Jesus, He leads us to this table where we taste God's forgiveness, time and again. If it weren't for Jesus, we'd never get there.

Postscript

Because the congregation I serve is more conservative than the congregation that helped form me, I figured this sermon would meet with, perhaps, fifty-fifty approval even though its claim seemed very mild to me. In fact, as I held my congregants in thought and prayer during the writing process, the sermon became milder and milder and milder—to the point that I had to send it to my home church's pastor to be sure I hadn't failed to make any claim at all! Among his helpful responses was the suggestion that I specifically invite congregants to talk with me about capital punishment. So, I added the invitation to the sermon and repeated it later in the service. Although no one actually requested that particular conversation, several people thanked me for the offer. After struggling to give all my hearers "a place to stand," I find it deeply moving that simply expressing a willingness to listen and share may have been my most effective pastoral act.

Only one parishioner approached to vehemently disagree with the sermon's assertions; many members of this gracious congregation expressed appreciation for the "thought-provoking" sermon; and one woman animatedly thanked me for helping her recognize her inconsistency in opposing abortion while supporting the death penalty. Perhaps the conversation that, at a colleague's urging, I invited my congregation to enter will occur gradually, internally, and with no further words spoken by me.