**The Kingdom And The Cross:**

**Dying On The Way**

**Mark 8:27-38**

**March 10, 2024**

 We live in a politically charged world these days. All along the political and ideological spectrum, divisions run deep, and distrust runs high. Friendships have ended, families have divided, and people have left churches because of political disagreements. If you need an example, then try this: the next time you are at a gathering with extended family, just ask, “So, how is everybody feeling about the government?” and then sit back and watch the fireworks fly.

 It can be very discouraging, but perhaps it is helpful to realize this is not a unique experience in history. In fact, it’s kinda the norm. It certainly was the case back in the first century AD. It is hard to imagine a more politically charged environment than the land of Israel during the time of Jesus. The Roman Empire had expanded widely, bringing vast portions of the known world under its control. In doing so it managed to bring an impressive level of political stability to a wide range of ethnic groups, but that stability was not based on a mutual desire for the brotherhood of mankind. It was based on the ever-present threat of violence from Rome. Anyone who threatened the Empire’s control was met with swift and wrathful response. Meanwhile, underneath that veneer of imposed peace, resentment seethed and simmered.

 Especially in Israel. By the time Jesus showed up, Israel had been under the control of some foreign power or another for several hundred years. Rome was just the latest to put its boot on their neck. The people of Israel wanted to be free of it all. There was a deep longing to return to the days when Israel was free and sovereign under its own king. The Jews hated having to pay taxes to some pagan emperor and get permission to have their own religious festivals. If only someone could set them from all that.

 That desire found its fullest expression in their longing for the Messiah to come. There had been talk of a messiah for hundreds of years by this point. In its earliest days, the concept of messiah was very general. The word messiah in Hebrew simply means anointed, and so there were lots of messiahs, because there were lots of anointed people. Priests were anointed by God to perform their sacrificial duties in the Temple. Prophets were anointed by God to speak his word to his people. Kings were anointed to govern on God’s behalf.

But as time went forward, the concept of messiah took a more specific shape in the public conscience. People began talking not about messiahs, but about the Messiah – the one, true Messiah. This figure, whoever he was, would come as a great and mighty king to set things right once and for all. This Messiah, or this Christ was he was called in the Greek language, would gather his forces, run the foreign powers out of town, establish his throne, and bring in God’s just and powerful reign once and for all. The words of 1 Chronicles 16:35 speak to this desire when it says, “*Cry out, ‘Save us God our Savior; gather us and deliver us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name, and glory in your praise.’”* The air in Jesus’ day was shot through with expectations about this coming One who would make those words true.

Not surprisingly, several people came along and claimed to be that Messiah – or at least to be in league with him. We have historical records outside of Scripture, especially from the Jewish historian, Josephus, about men who tried to rally people behind their claim of messiahship and create an uprising against the Romans. In every case, it ended badly. Rome did not take kindly to anyone who challenged their authority, so they would swoop in, put the leader and his followers to death, and the whole thing would come to nothing. To put it simply, it was a dangerous thing to claim to be the Messiah. You were basically putting a target on your back. It was just a question of time before the authorities found you out and put you down.

When we read today’s passage from Mark 8, our first impression might be that Jesus is trying to steer clear of this danger. One day he takes his disciples away on a retreat to the city of Caesarea Philippi, which was about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. He wants to get them as far away as possible from their normal routines so that he can ply them with a question - two questions, really. First, he asked “Who do people say that I am?” Of course, Jesus wasn’t really interested in popular opinion. His first question was simply a way of stimulating conversation so that he could get to the real issue: who did the disciples think he was? They have now been with him for quite a while, and they’ve had a front row seat to witness all the amazing things he’s done: the teaching, the miracles, the challenges to the authorities. Who do they think Jesus is?

Peter is the first to respond. Peter was always the first to respond. *Peter answered, “You are the Messiah*. (Mark 8:29b)” Let’s not miss the huge significance of these words. This is the first time in history that human lips have explicitly professed Jesus to be the Messiah. This is a huge turn of insight. Jesus isn’t just a great teacher or a dynamic leader. He is the Messiah. He is the One all of Israel has been waiting for.

But notice how Jesus responds to Peter’s answer. Jesus’ first reaction is to say, “Shh. Don’t tell anyone.” Why would Jesus say this? Wouldn’t he want everyone to know this truth about him? Again, our first reaction might be to think Jesus is trying to avoid conflict with the Roman authorities. Maybe he doesn’t want the word to get out yet about his messiahship because he is not ready to deal with the threat of Roman opposition. Maybe he knows what has happened to others who have made a similar claim, and he wants to avoid the same outcome for his movement.

But as we read on, we will quickly discover this is not the case. Jesus is not trying to steer clear of the danger that comes with the mission his Father has sent him to fulfill. In fact, in this section of Mark’s gospel, Jesus is deliberately and purposefully moving toward Jerusalem, where he knows the final showdown will happen. Jesus is moving toward the danger, not running away from it. So, why does Jesus tell Peter and others to not tell anyone about him?

The answer is because Jesus is trying to avoid a greater danger. The real danger is that people will misunderstand the kind of Messiah he has come to be. Let’s not forget the expectations that were attached to the people’s hopes for a Messiah. They wanted to political and military hero who would run the enemies out of town. But that it not Jesus’ mission. That is not his purpose.

Notice what it says in the very next verse: “*He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.*”

With those words, Jesus not only blows their expectations; he blows their minds. This is an inconceivable idea. In fact, it is sheer nonsense. Everybody knows that the Messiah does not come into the world to be defeated by his enemies. He comes to destroy his enemies. The Messiah is a victor, not a victim.

Peter moves immediately to set the record straight. No way, Lord. This cannot be. This is wrong. This is bad, Lord. Peter is speaking for every human mind who simply cannot conceive that God’s anointed one would willingly, knowingly suffer defeat at the hands of his enemies. Everyone knows this is NOT how a Messiah behaves.

Everyone but Jesus, that is. Notice how Jesus has spoken of what is coming. He says this must happen. He doesn’t say that it might happen or that it could happen if things don’t go well. He says it must happen – that his suffering and death is a necessary part of God’s saving work. So, he responds to Peter’s rebuke with a rebuke of his own. *“’Get behind me Satan’, he said, ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’”*

Why does Jesus tell them not tell anyone about him? Because he knows they do not yet understand the nature of what he has come to do. Peter’s answer had been right, but it was incomplete. Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God who has come to save his people. But Peter doesn’t yet grasp the kind of Messiah Jesus will be. Jesus’ way will be the way of suffering love, a love that willingly, knowingly suffers on behalf of his people, a love that willingly, knowing suffers even on behalf of his enemies.

Jesus has to set Peter straight, because as one commentator has put it, a wrong understanding of messiahship leads to a wrong understanding of discipleship. Jesus will say in the very next verse, “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me, for whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life from and for the gospel will save it.* (Mark 8:34-35)” If we have not first wrestled with the strange and hard truth that Jesus’ messiahship will be one of suffering and sacrifice, then we are not prepared to follow after him. If Jesus came to suffer and die, then those who could come after him must be prepared to do the same.

If that sounds like an overstatement, then think about it this way. If you survey a hundred Christians and ask them, “What does it mean to be saved,” then the answer you will most often get will be some version of the following. “To be saved means that I have accepted Jesus as my Savior and Lord, he has forgiven me of my sin, and now I have the assurance that I will go to heaven when I die.” Now, is that a right answer? Yes, absolutely. Salvation does bring the absolute assurance of eternal life. But Jesus’ conversation with Peter shows that a right answer can still be an incomplete answer. Yes, salvation does give the assurance of life after death, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we have wrestled with what it will cost us in the meantime.

Here's why I say that. If salvation is about nothing more than the assurance of heaven, then it means that the saving work of Jesus doesn’t kick in until I die. Between now and then, well, it’s just business as usual. If that is the case, then the cross has nothing to do with how I live my life in the midst of this everyday world. It means that the call to die to myself has no immediate relevance.

Several years ago, standing in this very pulpit, I preached a sermon on loving our enemies. The words came straight from Jesus’ teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Just so you don’t think I am making it up, here’s the exact text:

“*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven* (Matthew 5:43-44).”

Well, when the service was over, I was approached by a young man who was visiting that day. He wanted me to know that my sermon was both confusing and dangerous. He said that in a world like ours, where we have terrorists running around killing people, this not the time or place or talk about loving our enemy. Now, we are here today to talk about Mark 8, not Matthew 5, but that conversation illustrates the exact mindset I am talking about. It is a mindset that says the call of salvation has nothing to do with how we live in the day-to-day world. Thanks to Jesus we can look forward to going to heaven when we die, but in the meantime we’ve just got to roll up our sleeves throw our weight around with everybody else.

But that day in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus wanted his disciples to see that to follow him is to answer a radically different call. We cannot follow a crucified savior if we are not willing to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow. Not in some future, ideal world, but in this world, with all its ugliness and brokenness and sin.

I said a moment ago that in this section of Mark’s gospel we see Jesus take a deliberate turn toward his own cross. In verse 27 we are told that Jesus posed his question to his disciples while they were “on the way.” That is an important phrase: “on the way.” Mark uses that exact phrase 7 times in the span of 3 short chapters. Mark is calling our attention that this teaching ministry of Jesus is happening “on the way.” On the way to where? On the way the to cross. Jesus wants us to see that the salvation he offers isn’t just some life insurance policy that we cash in when we die; it is a way of life – a costly, dangerous way of life – that he is calling us to live here and now. In that same short span of three chapters, Jesus will point us forward to his coming death three times. Jesus wants to know if we will be with him on the way. Will we follow with him in the way of suffering love? Will we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow?

I must confess that if statistics tell us anything about the way Christians claim to answer that question, the evidence isn’t encouraging. We have decades’ worth of research to tell us that on the whole, those who claim to be followers of Jesus live lives that are not fundamentally different from the lives of non-believers. In fact, 20 years ago an evangelical scholar named Ron Sider published a book with the subtitle “Why are Christians Living Just Like The Rest Of The World?” In the introduction he offers this overview:

“The findings in numerous national polls conducted by highly respected pollsters…are simply shocking. [They] hand us survey after survey demonstrating that evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general. Divorce is more common among born-again Christians than in the general American population. Only 6 percent of evangelicals tithe. White evangelicals are the most likely people to object to neighbors of another race. The sexual promiscuity of evangelical youth is only a little less outrageous than that of their nonevangelical peers.”

Now, we could dive deep into any one of those issues and have long conversations but taken together they point us to a disturbing conclusion. It is not my place to judge, nor is it yours, but it seems demonstrably clear that many people who claim to be Christian have never actually heard the call of Jesus, who calls us to deny ourselves as we follow him. We follow him to the cross, where he lays down his life as an atonement for sin, but on the way there, he calls us to lay aside our pride, our desires, our ego, our agenda, and to take up the cross of suffering love. In our marriages, in our business relationships, in our treatment of our neighbor, in our generous use of our resources, in our readiness to serve, in our willingness to forgive, in our desire to live a life of personal holiness and righteousness – this is what it looks like to take up our cross.

Yes, we live in charged and tense world. If it feels dangerous to follow Jesus in this world, that’s because it is. But it was no less dangerous 2000 years ago. That did not stop our Lord from moving directly toward his own death and resurrection. If we believe He is who He says He is, that He really is the Messiah, then we must not let it stop us either.