

Mark 8: 27-38

OUR GOSPEL READING BEGINS WITH JESUS ASKING HIS DISCIPLES A STRAIGHTFORWARD QUESTION: "WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?" OR "WHAT'S THE WORD ON THE STREET? WHAT ASSUMPTIONS ARE PEOPLE MAKING ABOUT ME? ARE YOU HEARING ANY GOSSIP? ANY THEORIES? GIVE ME THE SCOOP."

APPARENTLY THE DISCIPLES ARE HEARING PLENTY, BECAUSE THEY JUMP IN WITH ANSWERS: "PEOPLE SAY YOU'RE JOHN THE BAPTIST. OTHER PEOPLE SAY YOU'RE ELIJAH! ACTUALLY, A LOT OF FOLKS THINK YOU'RE ONE OF THE PROPHETS." MAKES ME WONDER IF THE DISCIPLES ALSO OFFER JESUS SOME OF THE HARSHER ANSWERS THEY'VE PICKED UP DURING THEIR TRAVELS: "SOME PEOPLE SAY YOU'RE A FRAUD. A HERETIC. A TRAITOR TO ROME. SOME PEOPLE DON'T CARE YOU WHO ARE...THEY JUST DON'T LIKE YOU."

INTERESTINGLY, JESUS NEITHER AFFIRMS NOR DENIES THEIR ANSWERS. HE SIMPLY LISTENS, ALLOWING THE DISCIPLES TO OFFER UP EVERYTHING THEY THINK THEY KNOW, BASED ON OTHER PEOPLE'S INVESTIGATIONS, SPECULATIONS, AND ASSUMPTIONS. AS IF TO SAY: THIS IS AN OKAY PLACE TO BEGIN. WE NAME WHAT WE'VE HEARD. DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER KIND OF THINKING.

IT MAY BE AN OKAY PLACE TO *BEGIN*, BUT IT'S NOT AN OKAY PLACE TO STAY. SO JESUS FOLLOWS UP WITH ANOTHER QUESTION: "WHO DO *YOU* SAY THAT I AM?"

I'M GUESSING THERE'S A LONG SILENCE IN THE WAKE OF THIS SECOND QUESTION. I IMAGINE THE DISCIPLES SHUFFLE THEIR FEET. COUGH. AVOID EYE CONTACT WITH JESUS. PERHAPS THEY CAST ANXIOUS GLANCES AT EACH OTHER, EACH ONE HOPING SOMEONE ELSE WILL ANSWER.

AND I IMAGINE JESUS, STANDING PATIENTLY THROUGH THAT LONG SILENCE, WAITING TO HEAR WHAT HIS CLOSEST FRIENDS WILL SAY ABOUT HIM. CAN THEY DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN THE TALK ON THE STREET AND THE WITNESS OF THEIR OWN HEARTS? ARE THEY WILLING TO STAKE THEIR LIVES ON WHAT THEY'VE EXPERIENCED FIRSTHAND OF JESUS? DO THEY *REALLY* KNOW HIM? TRUST HIM? LOVE HIM?

WITH HIS SECOND QUESTION, JESUS ASKS HIS FOLLOWERS TO PUT ASIDE OTHER PEOPLE'S INTERPRETATIONS, AND ANSWER FOR THEMSELVES. IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO RELY ON OTHER PEOPLE'S ANSWERS. AT SOME POINT, OUR FAITH MUST BECOME PERSONAL. INTIMATE. INVESTED. WHO DO *YOU* SAY THAT I AM?

IMPETUOUS, IMPULSIVE PETER GETS EXCITED AND PROFESSES THAT JESUS IS INDEED THE LONG-PROMISED MESSIAH. JESUS THEN BEGINS TO EXPLAIN THINGS TO HIS DISCIPLES SAYING, "IT IS NECESSARY THAT THE SON OF MAN PROCEED TO AN ORDEAL OF SUFFERING,

BE TRIED AND FOUND GUILTY BY THE ELDERS, HIGH PRIESTS, AND RELIGION SCHOLARS, BE KILLED, AND AFTER THREE DAYS RISE UP ALIVE.” AS SOON AS PETER HEARS THIS, HE IMMEDIATELY BACKS AWAY AND REBUKES JESUS. JESUS’ WORDS SHATTER THE GLAMOR OF FOLLOWING THIS LONG-EXPECTED MESSIAH. THIS IS CERTAINLY NOT THE KIND OF LIFE PETER WANTS TO UNDERTAKE. WHILE JESUS SEEMS TO BE THE MESSIAH, THE JEWISH PEOPLE HAD NEVER EXPECTED A LEADER WHO MUST SUFFER AND DIE. THAT WAS SIMPLY LUDICROUS AND IRRATIONAL. WHO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND *CHOOSES* TO SUFFER? AND FURTHERMORE, WHO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WANTS TO FOLLOW A LEADER WHO IS ON HIS WAY TO DIE?

WELL, JESUS CONTINUES TO TEACH HIS DISCIPLES ABOUT WHAT FOLLOWING HIM IS REALLY GOING TO MEAN. HE SAYS, “ANYONE WHO INTENDS TO COME WITH ME HAS TO LET ME LEAD. YOU’RE NOT IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT, I AM. DON’T RUN FROM SUFFERING, EMBRACE IT. IF ANY OF YOU WANT TO FOLLOW ME, YOU MUST DENY YOURSELF, TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME. FOLLOW ME AND I’LL SHOW YOU HOW. SELF-HELP IS NO HELP AT ALL. SELF-SACRIFICE IS THE WAY, MY WAY, SAVING YOURSELF, YOUR TRUE SELF. WHAT GOOD WOULD IT DO TO GET EVERYTHING YOU WANT AND LOSE YOU, THE REAL YOU? WHAT COULD YOU EVER TRADE YOUR SOUL FOR?

WELL, JESUS’ WORDS DID NOT GO OVER WELL WITH PETER AND QUITE HONESTLY, THEY DON’T GO OVER VERY WELL WITH US. MOST OF US CHOOSE RELIGION AND COME TO BELIEVE THE IMPORTANT THINGS DEEPLY BECAUSE WE FEEL THEY ARE GOOD FOR US. AND WE LIKE TO FEEL GOOD. UPLIFTED. WE LIKE A FAITH THAT FITS OUR COMFORTABLE LIFE STYLES. WE TEND TO LIKE A FAITH IN WHICH WE CAN PARTICIPATE WHEN *WE CHOOSE* TO PARTICIPATE. IF THE EVENT, THE SERVICE FITS INTO OUR SCHEDULES, WE WILL PARTICIPATE. WE WANT A FAITH THAT DOES NOT DEMAND TOO MUCH FROM US. FURTHERMORE, WE WANT TO FOLLOW A STRONG GOD WHO HEALS OUR ILLNESSES, PROVIDES AMPLE PROSPERITY, GUARANTEES SECURITY, URGES OUR FAVORITE TEAMS ONTO VICTORY, AND GENERALLY KEEPS US HAPPY, HEALTHY AND WISE. SO, WHEN WE HEAR WHAT JESUS IS SAYING, WE TOO RESPOND BY THINKING SUFFERING IS NOT APPEALING. IF ANYONE OF US ARE OFFERED A LIFE OF SUFFERING VERSUS A LIFE FREE FROM SUFFERING, YOU CAN BET YOUR BOTTOM DOLLAR WE ARE GOING TO GO FOR THE ONE THAT IS PAIN FREE. YES, THIS IS WHERE WE MUST GET HONEST ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. FIRST OF ALL, NOBODY’S LIFE IS EVER GOING TO BE PAIN FREE OR FREE FROM SUFFERING. AND, CHRISTIANITY IS NOT ABOUT LIVING AN EASIER LIFE, LIVING A LIFE FREE FROM PAIN, OR BELIEVING IN A GOD WE CAN TURN INTO OUR PERSONAL SANTA CLAUS TO HELP SOLVE LIFE’S PROBLEMS OR GIVE US ALL WE WANT.

FROM THIS POINT ON IN MARK’S GOSPEL, JESUS BEGINS TO SHOW US HOW TO DIE. WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN LIFE AND JESUS NOW DEMONSTRATES HOW WE RE TO GIVE IT UP AND GIVE IT AWAY. I THINK FOR MOST OF US, THIS IS AN IDEA THAT RUNS COUNTER TO ALL THAT

WE WANT TO BELIEVE. IT REALLY DOES SEEM IRRATIONAL. YET, JESUS MAKES IT ABSOLUTELY CLEAR THAT GOD DOES NOT CARE ABOUT GIVING US ALL OF THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR COMFORTABLE LIVING. WHAT GOD DOES CARE ABOUT ARE MATTERS OF THE HEART. JESUS MAKES IT CLEAR THAT IF YOU WANT TO HAVE A DEEPLY MEANINGFUL LIFE THAT TRULY MATTERS, YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE HAND OVER PETTY OBSESSIONS AND MISTAKEN PRIORITIES. QUITE FRANKLY, FOLLOWING JESUS MEANS LIVING A VERY COUNTER-CULTURAL LIFE AND LETTING GO OF SELF, LETTING GO OF THE INTENSE FOCUS ON SELF, A SELF-INTEREST AND FOCUS THAT RUNS RAMPANT IN OUR CULTURE. YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE TO THINK MORE ABOUT LOVING OTHERS THAN BEING LOVED, MORE ABOUT WORKING TO UNDERSTAND THAN BEING UNDERSTOOD, AND MORE ABOUT FORGIVING THAN BEING FORGIVEN.

WE CAN TRY TO SAFE-DEPOSIT-BOX OUR LIVES ALL WE WANT AND BE VERY, VERY CAUTIOUS ABOUT WHOM WE EVEN LET INTO OUR LIVES. BUT THIS IS NOT LIVING. IN FACT, ACCORDING TO JESUS, IT'S DOWNRIGHT DANGEROUS LIVING. WE'LL LOSE OUR SOUL IF WE'RE NOT CAREFUL. LIVING A LIFE THAT REALLY MATTERS IN THE NAME OF JESUS WILL NOT ALLOW ROOM FOR CLUTCHING OR HOARDING OR PLAYING IT SAFE. HOARDING YOUR TIME, CLUTCHING YOUR RESOURCES IS NOT A LIFE ACCORDING TO JESUS.

THE DEEP TRUTH JESUS IS TRYING TO TELL US IS THAT ONLY WHEN YOU GIVE YOUR LIFE AWAY FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS, ONLY THROUGH SERVING, LOVING AND CARING FOR OTHERS, DO YOU REALLY DISCOVER LIFE, LIFE THAT TRULY MATTERS. WHEN WE ARE FINALLY ABLE TO LET GO OF SELF, TO LET GO OF OUR WORRY, TO LET GO OF OUR ANXIETY, TO LET GO OF OUR NEED TO CONTROL, TO LET GO OF ALL THAT HOLDS US CAPTIVE AND THEN REALLY DIE TO SELF, WE DISCOVER THAT GOD IS ALREADY IN THAT PLACE, WALKING WITH US AND HOLDING US IN LOVE.

WHO DO WE SAY JESUS IS? LORD? MESSIAH? SAVIOR? SON OF GOD? REDEEMER? DO WE HAVE THE TITLES RIGHT BUT NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND THEIR MEANING? IS THE JESUS YOU FOLLOW A JESUS WHO DISLIKES THE SAME PEOPLE YOU DISLIKE? VALUES THE SAME COMFORTS YOU VALUE? CHERISHES THE SAME LIFE GOALS YOU CHERISH? OR IS HE THE JESUS WHO ONCE MADE PETER FLINCH IN SHAME? THE JESUS OF HUMILITY AND SURRENDER? SELF-DENIAL AND SACRIFICE? DEATH AND RESURRECTION?

SOMEONE SAID WHO WE THINK JESUS IS WILL DETERMINE HOW FAR WE'LL GO IN FOLLOWING HIM. HOW LARGE OR TINY A CROSS WE'LL BEAR IN HIS NAME. HOW HUMBLY WE'LL REPENT OF OUR FAILURES, AND BEGIN AGAIN TO BE HIS HANDS AND FEET TO THOSE IN NEED.

WHO DO YOU SAY JESUS IS? DO YOU KNOW? DO YOU ASK? WHO IS JESUS TO YOU?

