

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Mark 8: 27-38

There are basic aphorisms to fly fishing that any beginner learns. There are basic principles that are helpful. These include the basics of reading a stream, the general behaviors of brown trout vs. rainbow trout vs. cutthroat or brook trout, the basic line set up, the wisdom of casting upstream vs downstream, etc. And these basic truths are reliable, except when there are variables that make them generally untrue. These basic aphorisms are true, except in the many circumstances when they are not.

You learn to read the stream and the basic structure where trout hold, though where and how they hold is very dependent on water temperatures, time of year, hatches, and so on. Brown trout tend to take your fly and go deep, rainbows more likely to jump; except I've many times had rainbows go deep and brown trout jump. It is good to be stealthy, except when it doesn't matter. It is better to work upstream except for when it is better to work downstream. And on some streams, you can get away with 3x tippet at the end of your line, others anything less than fine line like 5 or 6x and you might as well go home. Therefore, it is my belief that no rule or truism in fly fishing is true much more than half the time. There are too many variables.

This is why developing the skills of observation and the dynamic sense of what is going on under different circumstances is the key to enjoying my day on the stream. You cannot rely too heavily on how you thought you were going to fish on a given day. You may have to adapt, to pay attention, to have options, and this is where it is helpful to have a wide variety of flies.

What if the journey of faith had a similar character? There are truths, aphorisms, basic lessons learned, basic rhythms, basic expectations. And in many circumstances, they may be true, except for when the circumstances change things and something else is called for. We learn the basics, but given the variables of life, the basics only set the stage, not give us everything we need to know. And how do you know unless you are practiced at paying attention, listening, learning, adapting.

The disciples have been following Jesus for some time by the time we get to chapter eight of Mark's gospel. They have seen Jesus work, listened to his teachings, have the background to know how significant a messiah is. They are not

lazy half-interested students, mind you. They have forsaken careers and family and homes to be on the move with Jesus. They are studied students at this point. But even a studied student is not done learning, or paying attention, and if he or she relies too heavily upon what they already know or what they have already concluded or assumed, then they might miss the nuance of a particular moment, miss what they are being told, or how expectations are shifting.

In our reading, Jesus is going along with the disciples and he asks them what the word out there is, what are people saying about Jesus. Who do people say that I am? And they respond “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” And there is a sense that these are not bad answers. Jesus is not John the Baptist, though he and John attracted similar types and both called for repentance, and signaled a shift. Jesus is like Elijah, except in the ways he is not. And Jesus is like the prophets, though much more than that as well.

And then Jesus asks them, “but who do you say that I am?” And Peter speaks up. “You are the Messiah.” And this is correct. They, having had a closer and longer-term exposure to Jesus’ ministry and teaching, Peter gives a more accurate answer, that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. And this conclusion and the expectations associated with this will be helpful, except when they are not. Their perceptions of what a messiah is and does will give some context, though probably not reliable more than fifty percent of the time.

And so, Jesus begins to add information to what they might know of a messiah. Jesus starts to give a fuller sense of what it means for him to be the Messiah, a fuller sense of expectation of how things are going to go, and what shape Jesus’ ministry is going to take. “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

Now what Jesus is saying is clearly not in any of the beginner books, not in messiahs for dummies or any other primers on the subject. For in those 101 resources, you would learn that a Messiah helps shift the power balance, is a political leader who puts God’s people in the ascendancy, who has the might and the charisma to defend and advocate for God’s people. And in their hopeful visions of a future under this Messiah, nowhere is there room for this messiah to be rejected, beaten, and killed.

This is where we must hone our skills for integrating new information or insight into the older knowledge. It is here where you must hone your skills for paying attention, for listening, for adapting. But it is too far outside of what Peter

expected, to unappealing to the visions already in Peter's head. And so, Peter responds by taking Jesus aside and rebuking him. You can't be talking like this Jesus. Stop being so negative, that is not what is going to happen.

It takes a touch of boldness to take your teacher aside and tell them they are out of line, that they don't know what they are talking about.

Jesus, the teacher, then rebukes him back. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus confronts Peter. Now I disagree with the translators' capitalization of Satan. It makes it sound that Jesus is called Peter the devil, the guy with the red horns, and so on. But the Greek word *satanas* is a translation of the Hebrew *satan*, which is not a proper noun, but a word that simply means adversary. In a court setting it is the opposing counsel. Jesus is saying to Peter, that he is not in step with Jesus, but has become an opposition because he is fixed in his expectations and not listening anymore. Peter is trying to steer Jesus' path, rather than be instructed by it.

The general aphorisms and truths are true and helpful until they are not, and then you have to adapt, listening and attuning yourself to the nuances of the moment.

To offer another general truism, we are enculturated to think of truth in particular ways, that the basics we learn are Truths, capital T. And when God acts in ways that seem to depart from our truisms, we question everything we have known, or we question the basics about whether God loves us, or is present, or cares, or is able to help. We go into crisis mode. We are like a frustrated fisher-person who busts their rod over their knee. And I, in no way, wish to minimize our crises of faith, just wish to re-construe them. God is still present and working, just in ways we have not come to perceive, or anticipate or participate in yet.

And as people who have been journeying in the faith for many years, this is a call to refresh our walk. Because if we are operating on old information, or basic truisms without the ongoing walk with Christ where we are learning afresh, we may not be in step with how Christ is leading us, or what he is up to that we might participate in.

As we started this season of Lent last week, we affirmed the truth that Lent reminds us of, that we are able to be redeemed, and to grow and change. It is an opportunity to press into our relationship with the Lord, into our spiritual life. And part of why we should avail ourselves of these opportunities is that otherwise, we might rely only on what we have learned in the past, on our expectations or formulations, on our sense of truth and certainty – and these things will be helpful

much of the time, except when they are not, and they are not likely to be true much more than fifty percent of the time.

Faith is not a bound set of information and doctrines. No, faith is built on our relationship with the Christ and a life of following, a relationship that unfolds and deepens. And as circumstances change and new realities emerge, if we are not in close step with the Lord, if we are not paying attention, listening adapting, we may be running on old information when Christ has something more to say to us. We may end up like Peter, rebuking the teacher, being an adversary, when we should be listening and growing.

Jesus not only rebukes Peter, but he starts portraying the journey not only for himself, but the life of discipleship he is calling Peter and the other disciples to; a life quite varied from what Peter was expecting.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

Faith is not static, it is based on following, on active learning and seeking to apply what we are learning to our lived lives. I’m not saying what you have learned in the past is not true in many ways, or that these things have not been immensely formative. But I am saying that the process of discipleship, of learning and growing, has to continue. It does not stop. I think this is generally true of life. Who I am today is not who I was three years ago, or ten years ago, or twenty years ago. We grow, change, evolve. So do relationships, so does faith.

In this season of Lent, let us press into our journey of faith again, pressing closer to the Christ who still has much to teach us, ways he wants to form us, ministry in which he wants to use us.

And all God’s people said... Amen