

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
February 28th, 2021
Mark 8: 31-38

Suppose you were invited into a board meeting for a presentation. And in that presentation, the executive laid out a plan that would raise costs, cut revenue, and reduce the company's credibility, all leading to eventual bankruptcy. Would you just nod along with approval? Or imagine if I, as your new pastor, presented at the congregational meeting what you could expect in my first several months. That I planned to start preaching wildly unpopular things that would drive people away and disrupt the plans for the future so much that you all would start plotting my removal or even my demise. The search committee, feeling somewhat responsible and still having their old hopes intact, would likely pull me aside and say something like, "listen, buddy, knock it off! This isn't what we talked about!"

So perhaps Peter isn't entirely out of line when he pulls his teacher aside and rebukes him. He believes Jesus is the messiah; he just told Jesus as much. He is committed, and his hopes for what Jesus can do are intact. I suspect Peter wants to see a nice graph of growing support, increased crowds, climbing poll numbers. Peter's vision has much in common with the prevailing conceptions of a messiah, a political leader, ousting Rome, strength, appeal to the people, inspiring hope and resistance. It was a vision of messiahship and salvation rooted in the past, in the hopes that God would put a leader back on the throne of David and take Israel back to a time of independence and autonomy.

With these preconceived notions and hopes in view, Jesus' predictions are bleak. "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. He said all this quite openly." These predictions seem so out of line with Peter's expectations, so far outside of his hopes and plans that the only logical conclusion he is able to draw is that Jesus is wrong. That can't be—that is not how God redeems the world. That is not what God is calling us to do, that is not what this path is supposed to look like. Don't be discouraging people and speaking all dark and pessimistic, Jesus! So, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. "Listen, buddy, knock it off! This isn't what I signed up for!"

Things get heated. Jesus rebukes Peter back, accuses him of not just misunderstanding him but opposing him, opposing what God is up to. He calls Peter Satan, which either just means adversary or Jesus is calling him the devil by name. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." As

our Hudson, who has a whole series of funny interjections, would say, “Plot Twist!” “Collective gasp!”

What is Peter feeling at that moment? Satan?! Mind on human things?! Called out and rebuked there in front of the others, made an object lesson as Jesus continues to teach them. Maybe Peter was just the type to lock horns, to get heated and exchange words that neither fully meant, and then move on not really remembering or caring. Or perhaps Peter was embarrassed or cut to the heart. What questions and thoughts interrupted his sleep that night? Was he misguided, should he never have come on this journey to begin with? Should he quit right then and there and go back to life in Galilee, attending the synagogue there and return to the fishing business? Did he wonder if Jesus really wanted him? Maybe he wasn’t supposed to be a disciple after all. Or maybe his midnight dilemmas included whether Jesus was the messiah he hoped Jesus to be.

This moment is interesting. Peter was always the fervent one, quick to step out and speak up. He was the one to get out of the boat and walk to Jesus on the water. As he walked that water, his faith wavered, and he turned his attention to the waves and faltered. He faltered, but his inclinations were good, and Jesus lifts him into the boat. His faith was affirmed even while being tested. But this instance is a little different. Peter is still the one to speak first, but his inclination runs counter to Jesus. Yes, he still believes Jesus is the messiah and is on board for that, but his expectations are such that he seeks to dissuade Jesus. This is a much riskier place to be than merely faltering in faith on the water. His vision, the path he expects, is different from Jesus’ vision.

This is the thing about following Jesus. At first, it seems romantic and simple, like going on a first date. Jesus loves me and will never hurt me. Jesus will save the world and make all things right. But we bring our assumptions, our preconceived notions, our hopes, our hurts, our needs, our family histories. Unawares, we bring ourselves. We assume Jesus is registered with our political party. We hear him speak, and we transcribe it into something that fits with the way we think already. And at some point, it all gets triggered. Or, at some point, it comes to a head.

It must have seemed a surprise to Peter to find himself at odds with Jesus. This would not be the last time Peter would find his zeal and vision out of sync with Jesus, however, such as his grabbing the soldier’s sword in the garden of Gethsemane and slicing off the guy’s ear. Peter is like, if you’re not going to take up swords and fight, then I will. He will be so out of sorts when Jesus is being interrogated that he will deny knowing Jesus altogether. After the resurrection, Peter is sure Jesus doesn’t want him anymore, or that he doesn’t belong in such a

movement, and goes back to fishing. And yet, at every juncture, Peter will come around to listen and follow again.

And in this instance, Jesus not only doubles down on his teaching about what he would have to go through, but he keeps teaching that this is not just a blip on the screen, an aberration to the paradigm, but it is a new paradigm. Peter and the other disciples are to follow such a paradigm as well. “He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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.”

There seems to be two intertwined lessons in all this. One is that Jesus will not just be filling everybody’s expectations and making everybody happy. Instead, he redefines what the messiah will look like and accomplish and what the path of discipleship will be defined by. This revelation was probably a surprise to many of them. Their perceptions of the messiah, of the Son of Man, did not involve such things. They were surprised I suspect, not only because Jesus had some hard things to go through, but that their path of following and discipleship would be patterned after Jesus’s steps, that they would be called to follow a similar contour. Take up your cross and follow me. Dying to self, inner-regeneration.

The second lesson is that this journey is less about knowing the answers and more about walking in step with the Christ. Peter’s preconceived notions and staunch vision for Jesus kept him from being open to what he was saying. Peter was sure. Peter had expectations, and perhaps he did not realize how powerfully those expectations were at work. Peter was shaped by his upbringing and society’s ideas and perhaps his own desires and needs to do something big and important. Peter was so sure that he ends up standing there telling the messiah that he is wrong!

Now, Peter keeps following after all these events. He falters, his inclinations run counter to Christ, he denies or turns away. And yet, each time, he ends up following again. When he started to sink out on the water, Jesus grabbed him and pulled him to the boat. When he and the others argued about who among them was the greatest, Jesus then taught them about welcoming a child. When he cut off the ear of the soldier, Jesus calmly healed the ear. When Peter denied him and then went back to fishing, Jesus called him again. He asked him to throw the net on the other side of the boat like he had done when he first called Peter. And he invited Peter to shore for breakfast. And Peter dived in like he did the first time Jesus called him and swam to shore. And over breakfast, Jesus asked Peter, do you love

me. Three times. Once for every time that Peter denied Jesus. I love you. I love you. You know that I love you.

And in this instance. As Mark records the events, shortly after this heated exchange, Jesus takes him up the mountain where he is transfigured. Each time Peter flounders and falters and even fails, Jesus shows Peter that he loves him, that he wants him, that he has called him to play a role in the building up of the community, a community that we call the church.

It's a tumultuous journey for Peter, in a sense. And yet, each breakage, each moment that tests the calling, that tests the bonds seems to deepen it, seems to make the calling more difficult to turn from. It makes the relationship too hard to leave behind.

It makes me wonder how much the shape of one's faith changes over the course of such a journey. Now I was taught growing up that if you are firm in your faith, it does not change. You remain steadfast no matter what happens. This stiff upper lip approach to faith was laced with pride and stubbornness and the refusal to show heartbreak and emotion.

But if our path of faith is like Peter's then it is likely that all our personal baggage and hopes and expectations will get triggered and confronted and transformed along the way. For in this passage, what I find interesting is that Peter's overall confession doesn't change. Who do you say that I am? "You are the Messiah," the savior. Peter knew that and he was correct, and that confession does not change. And yet, his perceptions and assumptions about what that meant changed dramatically. Are your perceptions of being the disciple of the Christ the same as they were at earlier parts of your journey? How have your emotional connections and understandings changed over the course of this relationship, through the ups and downs?

The relationship. The walk. The journey with Christ. That is what it comes down to, isn't it? If your following is built on Jesus doing things according to your preconceived notion, then when he reveals that he will not be doing that, you would walk away. It seems Peter considered that. There were other followers who did exactly that. If you need Jesus to agree with you, then there will be points of mutual rebuking likely. And what redemptive transformation will we miss out on? But if we are willing to follow, to learn to listen and to be taught, we will keep coming back, just as Peter does, learning and growing and being transformed little by little, until we are made new, and our visions are those of Jesus', and our hurts are healed, and needs fulfilled.

May it be so. And all God's children said... Amen.

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹ 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. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."