

(Mark 8:27-38 NRSV)

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.

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."

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The Anointed One?

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Text: Mark 8:27-38

Sometimes the Gospels are hard to figure out. Sometimes the stories are perplexing. There is the story a few chapters ahead of where we are reading today where Jesus comes upon a fig tree. It is not the season for figs, but Jesus goes and looks for figs on the tree anyway. When he doesn't find any figs, because figs are out of season, Jesus curses the tree and it withers. Peter asks Jesus about why he killed the fig tree, and Jesus says, "Have faith in God." That's a story a little hard to figure. The fig tree bears fruit when it is supposed to. Jesus withers the fig tree for not having fruit, At a time it's not supposed to have fruit on it. And Jesus' only explanation is, "Have faith in God." Sometimes stories in the Bible can be confounding.

But this morning's story is not one of those. This morning's story is as clear as can be. In this morning's story, we can understand the mistake Peter has made, and for which Jesus rebukes his later-to-be-rock-of-the-church disciple.

Jesus wants to find out what his disciples think of him. Jesus wants to find out who his disciples think he is. So, he starts by asking them who others say he is. They say that others believe he may John the Baptist or Elijah, back from the dead. Or maybe some other prophet. Then Jesus asks the really important question, "Who do you say that I am." Peter boldly steps forward and says, "You are the Messiah, the anointed one, the one sent by God."

Jesus does not deny the title. Jesus seems to acknowledge that he is the Messiah, and then he begins teaching them about what is going to happen to him. He tells them that he will endure great suffering, that he will be betrayed, rejected and killed, before he rises to his glory.

The disciples are stunned. Once again, Peter takes the initiative. He takes Jesus aside and says, "Lord, you must have misunderstood something here. I said you were the Messiah. John the Baptist may have been executed. Other prophets may have met bad ends. But such an end is not appropriate for the Messiah. You are cut out for greater things."

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In what has to be one of the most famous lines from the New Testament, Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me Satan.” Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

We know how the story goes. We know that Jesus is right. We know those terrible days in Jerusalem when it all comes tumbling down. We know the last supper; we know Good Friday; we know Easter morning. And we know that Peter was simply too set on his own agenda to get it right. Sometimes the Gospel stories are hard to figure out. But this morning this story is as clear as a bell. Peter refused to hear the truth that Jesus espoused. Peter had his own truth, which he wanted to put on Jesus’ lips. And Jesus said, You are not the leader here. Get behind me. Follow me. Set your mind on the things which I am showing you.

How fortunate we are to have this story to guide us. How fortunate we are to have this story to show us the divine things we are to pay attention to. How fortunate we are to have Jesus and the Gospels to point the way, especially when the stories are so clear. How far we have come since Peter.

Peter was such a problem. Well, actually, it wasn’t just Peter. He was the spokesperson most often. But James and John, they were problems too, always wanting the best seats in heaven. Judas, of course, was really a problem, a traitor. And all of them ran, when the crowd came with torches and swords that fateful night. They were all problems; Peter was just the most frequent example. They were all problems, though. They just didn’t get Jesus’ message. Thank God we understand. Thank God we get it right. Thank God we know what Jesus was all about. Thank God we have such a clear story so we can rest assured that we would never confuse our own agenda with God’s agenda, or with Jesus’ agenda.

But, let’s spend a little time with this story. Let’s revel in the point that Peter so obviously missed and that we so certainly understand. We probably don’t really need to, but I suppose one of the reasons we come to church is to be reminded of those truths we hold most dear.

So, there they are, Jesus and the disciples, talking about who Jesus is. Peter is bold. He says that Jesus is the Messiah. Then Jesus tells them all about how he must suffer, be betrayed and die. And they don’t get it. But we do, don’t we. We know that the disciples were attached to their own agendas, and their agendas surely did not include having Jesus disappoint them. Their agendas surely didn’t include disappointment and defeat. But we, who have learned from this story, are fully prepared for disappointment and defeat. We are fully prepared to have God or Jesus contradict what we think is true or what ought to happen and turn ourselves around, change our minds and follow. We are fully prepared to let go of our dearest beliefs and thank God for setting us straight. Thanks to this story, we know that the heart of our faith is to listen carefully to God so we can hear where we have made mistakes, where we are wrong, where God is trying to enlighten us. Thanks

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to this story, we are only too glad to give up what we most hope for and believe in, and let God tell us something different, even opposite.

Now, wait a minute. Wait just a minute. This is getting to sound a lot like the story of the fig tree. This is beginning to make about as much sense as Jesus' withering the fig tree and then telling the disciples to have faith. I'm beginning to think that in both cases the disciples are told to believe that something very peculiar is right. They are asked to believe that the suffering, betrayal and death of the one in whom they have placed all their hopes makes sense. They are asked to believe that cursing a tree because it isn't bearing fruit out of season makes sense. Or at least they are asked to have faith that God can make some sense out of those situations. I'm getting a little confounded myself. Let me see, now just how is it that these things make sense?

Whatever it is, it doesn't seem as easy to understand as it seemed at first glance. It is clear enough that Peter didn't understand Jesus. But when you scratch the surface a little, I can't help but think that Peter's misunderstanding is understandable. I can't help but think, when I actually think about it, that I agree with Peter. It seems dead wrong that the son of God, the one whom he had hoped would set the world aright, should end up on a cross. So, if I am to learn something from Peter's failure to comprehend, what I learn probably isn't as simple or as apparent as it first seems.

Underneath it all, though, there are, to be sure, things to learn. Perhaps first and foremost is the most obvious. Ought we not be cautious of what we are certain? If this story tells us anything, it tells us that good people get it wrong. It tells us that good people who put Jesus first above everything else in all their life, people who left everything else behind to follow Jesus because they thought so much of him and believed so much in him came to believe things Jesus said were completely wrong. If Peter and the others can get it so wrong, is it not arrogant and dangerous for us to think that we may not? Christian history is filled with calamities proudly dispensed by many who were sure they knew the mind of God. What, today, may we be perpetrating in the holy name of God?

Related to this caution is another point. Jesus told Peter to get behind him. That is, he told Peter it was time for him to follow rather than lead, time to listen rather than talk, time to pay attention rather than seek it. Today there is much demand for declaring one's faith. The religious right gives us a laundry list of the beliefs that one must hold to be saved and to be a true child of God. This list names abomination after abomination with the certainty of Peter, and as far as I can tell, as little willingness to listen. We in the more liberal church fall prey to our own overconfidence too. Testimony, witness and action are important requirements of our faith, but we would all do well to listen more

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carefully to what God may be saying, even the surprising and disturbing things God may be saying.

And perhaps most important of all, this story tells us of God turning bad to good, what my mother would have meant by turning a sow's ear into a silk purse. I am becoming convinced – after listening carefully, I hope – I am becoming convinced that Peter's error wasn't his horror and objection to what was to happen to Jesus. His error, and this really is like the fig tree story, Peter's error was to believe that if these things happened, if Jesus were to suffer, be betrayed and die, the whole project would come tumbling down and Jesus would not be the real Messiah. Too much Christian theology has tried to explain why it was necessary for Jesus to die in the sense of, why did God do that? The better exploration might be, why do we humans become so convinced of our brittle half-truths that when someone like Jesus comes on the scene, we get rid of him? If Jesus had to suffer, be betrayed and die, it was due to the inevitability of human certainty, that same certainty Peter had, the inevitability of human certainty to lead us astray. It wasn't a plot line devised by God.

But God has the last word. Whether it be something as inconsequential as a fig tree or something as central as Jesus, the message is that God will redeem that which has been wrongly destroyed. What Jesus was asking Peter to believe, what he told him to get behind him and follow him to find out, was that even when his most horrifying nightmare came to reality, God would not abandon him, and God would have the last word. When the crushing defeat of Good Friday came, as it predictably would, God promised, nonetheless, the magnificent sunrise of Easter morning.

So, in the end, in the end, maybe none of it is so easy to understand. But that is good. For the things we understand are so often devoid of truth, and even our best truths are frustrated by a world designed to rebuke them. The first is hard to avoid; the second is hard to stomach. But God is steadfast. But God ransoms our obstinance and performs alchemy on our defeats. While, Like Peter, we may have had a different idea for a deliverer, an anointed one, the one God has given us is the one we truly need. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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