

Sermon

Lent 2B – February 25, 2024

Mark 8:31-38

Last week on the first Sunday in Lent we heard Mark's version of Jesus in the wilderness and his encounter with Satan. I know people don't like it when I do this, but . . . what do you remember about that gospel passage and/or the sermon?

Primarily looking for: *Satan never left, and/or Jesus was tempted all his life.*

In Jesus we have the perfect example of what a perfect relationship with God looks like. This includes (among other things) regular prayer, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, freeing those in bondage, and treating minorities as equals. It includes prioritizing kingdom goals over and above worldly goals. It means recognizing that the world will want to silence you by any means necessary, up to and including death. Jesus knew this was where his path would lead, and he understood the cross was part of his divine destiny.

He understands this from the beginning. So he knew his destiny didn't include turning rocks to bread, leaping from the top of the temple, or to bow down to Satan in exchange for worldly power. Just because he COULD do those things doesn't mean he needed to do them. And, as I said last week, his temptations didn't end in the wilderness, they kept coming for the rest of his life, just like us. We see this in today's gospel.

Today's gospel passage is preceded by the feeding of the 4000, an encounter with Pharisees, trying to teach the DUH-sciples, healing a blind man, and asking the twelve, "Who do people say that I am?" It's here where today's passage takes place.

After Peter acknowledges him as the Messiah, Jesus gives the first of his passion predictions. He lets the disciples in on where his divine destiny will lead – to the cross. Peter, however, takes issue with this.

One of the things that makes Peter so appealing is his relatability to us. He's impetuous. He's determined. He's earnest. And he often has a short-term thought process.

When he rebukes Jesus for talking about his death and resurrection, it's because Peter cannot yet see what Jesus is all about. It's because Peter wants something different. Peter, like a lot of people then and far too many people today, wanted a militaristic, power-wielding, mighty conqueror. He wanted a Messiah who would crush his enemies and install the right people as powerful overlords. And in order to accomplish his version of a new world order, Peter takes on the role of Satan.

That name, Satan, isn't a proper noun, but is an adjective. It doesn't name the devil, but describes the role of the adversary, someone who is opposed to. We see a little of this today when someone says, "Let me play devil's advocate."

So Peter takes on the role of adversary.

And in that role he tries to tempt Jesus to go down a different path. The path Peter pushes is, in effect, the same one Jesus faced in the wilderness: to become politically powerful and use his influence to get people to revolt in his name.

How many times did Jesus bang his head on a wall and wonder if this was all worth it? How many times after hearing an adoring crowd cry out for him did he think about using his power to establish a larger

following? The temptation to both quit and become great are very real. Temptation never left Jesus. Temptation never leaves us.

When Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" he is not saying Peter is the devil incarnate. He is recognizing that Peter is playing the role of the adversary. He is recognizing that Peter is tempting him to change paths. What path is Peter tempting him to take? The path of worldly power.

Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.

Jesus is not banishing Peter. He is not evicting him from the group. Jesus isn't even accusing Peter of Satanic thoughts. What Jesus *IS* doing is pointing out that Peter is, at that moment, consumed by human thoughts. He is accused of putting human goals over and above kingdom goals. And this, quite honestly, is the same rebuke we also need to hear. The command to, "Get behind me" is a command to both Peter and us that we are to follow Christ, not to lead him where we want him to go.

This is always the temptation we face: To turn Christ into our follower, to lead Christ to places we desire, to equate worldly power with the goals of God.

The challenge we face is to submit our will to the will of Christ, to allow Christ to lead us, and to strive for kingdom goals not worldly goals.

This story, and this season of Lent, reminds us that the path of discipleship involves self-denial, servanthood, and carrying the cross of Christ.

May we never confuse personal ambition with Christian discipleship.