

Mark 8:23-31

Delight in Cross Bearing?

Let me tell it to you another way. I'm Peter, one of the twelve who has been following Jesus since his ministry began.

It had been an arduous journey, feeding thousands of people on the grassy lakeshore . . . and keeping company with Jesus as he healed many. It felt a little strange sometimes to stand incapacitated while Jesus worked so many miracles, but it's all Jesus wanted, really— to be *with us*.

The last leg of our journey was a hard one. The last few hundred meters had been a pretty steep climb up the plateau, and we were bone weary when we finally arrived near Caesarea Phillipi.

The air is fresher and more breathable up here. The many twisted old Syrian junipers have something to do with that, but so does the fact that there are water sources all around.

I remember the flashes of late afternoon sunlight that day playing off the leaves of the mulberry and pistachio trees, the sun darting in and out of the shade. We were right next to a stream that danced over a small natural dam made up of granite and basalt rocks that also glinted in the sun.

Jesus seemed to unwind a bit up there. And as he became re-energized, he shouldered up against a huge oak tree and began speaking to us.

"Tell me, you've been with me on the road awhile now. Who do people say that I am?" We took our guesses before he went on, "But who do you say that I am?"

I answered for us all. We had recently come to a consensus. "You are the Christ, the Messiah."

That's when Jesus said the most surprising thing, as if it was a logical sequiter to his being the Messiah. It would be the first time of many that I would feel Jesus was intentionally teaching us something.

He said, mysteriously to our ears, "It is necessary that the Son of Man go on from here 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." He said matter-of-factly, and his point couldn't be missed.

But I wondered. He is the Messiah, yet he must suffer, be rejected by the religious officials and be killed? What kind of sense did that make?

I couldn't help myself. No! You will overcome! I grabbed his arm and scolded him for talking so faithlessly.

He searched my eyes and then drew me into his embrace. "Ah, Peter, how much you love me! We'll get through this together. Yes, we'll get through this together, thanks be to God."



But that's not how it went is it? Jesus seemed to be almost startled by Peter's immediate reaction. It's obvious he expected a more faithful response from the one man who the other eleven looked up to.

He recoiled from Peter's touch, his eyes shooting darts: "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works."

A more faithful response from Peter would not be one based on feelings. And it wouldn't be based on human understanding, either.

What Jesus expected when he shared his hard news with them was the silence that comes with pondering something, mulling over something to learn from the one of them who is holy. (Remember Mary and the “good news” she received from God’s winged messenger? She pondered it.)

Like Peter, even Jesus, fully God but fully man too, was likely to give in / in the moment / and respond to pain and tragedy in ways that were all too human. Think of him in the Garden of Gethsemane praying that “this cup” be taken from him, but at the same time saying to his Father, “nevertheless, let your will be done.”

Or think of him on the cross uttering the very words we heard Mark read earlier in Psalm 22: “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”

In that Psalm, though, David goes from the despair of that verse to phrase after phrase saying, “But I will praise God forever, live for God, serve God my whole life long.” David acknowledges that although he may not understand why he has to suffer, God is the only holy one, and sometimes God’s ways are beyond our understanding . . . *beyond understanding*, but always right and just.

What it comes down to is: Can we live with that? Can we cling to the notion that our good God is with us always? And is that enough? Can we know in our bones that God is the only holy one around and that we know God through his equally holy son Christ Jesus? Can we know that, trust in God, and let the rest go?

The Psalmist says, “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you continue to be holy . . . in you our ancestors trusted, and you delivered them.”

That is enough for the Psalmist for the moment. Can it be enough for us?

Unfortunately, when we meet hardship, too often we jump right in and fight against it, thinking that with human knowledge and power and friends in high places we should always be able to overcome what seeks to diminish us or even overcome us.

How often do we pause first to ponder where God might be in any difficult scenario? How often do we wonder what the one with all the knowledge and power might want to accomplish through what we are facing?

For Peter and the other disciples there was no human reason to stand by and watch Jesus die. In fact, the very idea hurt. It was unbearable. They couldn't fathom that the Holy One might have purposes beyond their ability to know.

But surely there was another thought running through their heads, too.

Jesus said he was going to suffer and die, and they could think of no human reason to bank their lives and livelihoods on a flash-in-the pan, would-be Messiah . . . on a Messiah who against every teaching they had ever known about the Messiah, would die.

They cared too much about their reputations-- too much about what others would think about them, twelve common losers who gave up everything to follow a holy man who no one would remember in a few years.

"No, Jesus," Peter might have said, "You're the Messiah, so you won't die! We've given it all up for you! That's how much we believe!"

They assumed that what their Jewish world thought a Messiah would look like and do and say—that *that* was the truth—and in no way did that story end with the Messiah being killed. It ended, instead, to their benefit. It ended in a nation royally redeemed—finally and forever.

Where do we get our ideas about the way the world works? About . . .

- who are the winners and who are the losers
- about what is success and what is not,
- about the purpose of our lives?

Are we bound by human logic and reason . . . and more often by human desire?

Putting the shoe on the other foot: Is there a holy calling for all of us? A holy calling that supersedes the one that comes through our experiences and the input of our family and friends alone?

Do we even want to hear Jesus as he asks more of us than we can imagine? And isn't his the other voice speaking into our lives—different from the myriad voices all around?

This is especially important to remember today, as I suppose most people could say *in their own* day and age. What voice do you listen to? What voice can you trust?

Pastor Jon Tyson tells a story about Dietrich Bonhoeffer who in 1935 created an underground seminary that would match orthodox Christian belief with orthodox Christian practices. His vision was an intentional Christian community committed to listening primarily to the voice of Jesus the Shepherd and living the ethic of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount.

The intensity of the discipleship at the seminary was questioned by some, including one friend in particular, Wilhelm Niesel.

So Bonhoeffer took Niesel on a rowing trip to the Oder Sound. Here's an account of the trip . . .

When the two rowers reached the far shore, Bonhoeffer led Niesel up a small hill to a clearing from which they could see in the distance a vast field and the 'runways of a nearby squadron.' German fighter planes were taking off and landing, and soldiers moved hurriedly in purposeful patterns, like so many ants.

Bonhoeffer spoke of a new generation of Germans in training, whose disciplines were formed 'for a kingdom . . . of hardness and cruelty.' It would be necessary, he explained, to propose a superior discipline if the Nazis were to be defeated.

'You have to be stronger than these tormentors that you find everywhere today.'

Tyson the storyteller concludes the story with the profound conclusion:

- "What Bonhoeffer was doing [spiritually] in Finkenwalde [the seminary] had to be stronger than what Hitler was doing with his army."
- "[Christian] discipleship must be stronger than cultural formation."
- "Loyalty [to the Holy One] must be stronger than compromise."
- "We must live with devotion and conviction regardless of what they cost us."

Jesus says in Mark 8:34:

"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. Follow me and I'll show you how."

Great promises will be fulfilled in the lives of those who take up their crosses and follow Jesus.