

Sermon: Telling the Glory of God

New North Church, Hingham

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16 September 2018

Based on **Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38**

Lady Wisdom doesn't mince words at all, does she? She doesn't sugarcoat her meaning and she means what she says. So, when things go bad, words such as these can be hard to hear:

I will mock when panic strikes you,
when panic strikes you like a *storm*,
and your calamity comes like a *whirlwind*,
when distress and anguish come upon you.

Lately, we have experienced plenty of distress and anguish, in storms and fire. Our prayers are for all those affected by disaster, namely the gas line explosions in the Merrimac Valley and Hurricane Florence in the Carolinas, and for all those who respond first wherever people are in harm's way and who keep responding as events unfold.

It is right and fitting that we reflect on these things today, which also happens to be the first Sunday after our September 11 remembrances. The 2001 attacks are quite possibly the defining disaster for Americans in the twenty-first century. And we mention all of this because we are reading the Gospel According to Mark, and it is in these verses where everything turns for Jesus and his disciples and for the crowd around them.

According to Elaine Pagels, author of a book called *The Origin of Satan*, 'We cannot fully understand the New Testament gospels until we recognize that they are [...] wartime literature.'¹ We don't often talk about first-century Palestine – Judea, Samaria, Galilee – as a political tinderbox. Mark's Gospel was written in or about the year 70 and that's exactly when the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, not for fun but to put down a rebellion. The region had been restless for years and we could argue that it was Jesus who lit the match some thirty-five years earlier. Remember, the Romans put him to death as a seditious rebel who founded a movement that had been nothing but trouble for them ever since.

It is interesting to me, given Mark's wartime context, that today's events happen in the suburbs near Caesarea Philippi, which was a Roman city. This is about as far from Jerusalem as you can get and still be in Palestine. It's close to thirty miles up and over the mountains, due east of Tyre in Phoenicia. It was King Herod's son, Philip, who rebuilt the city Panias and then renamed it after the Emperor and himself.

This passage tells us a lot about Jesus, and it represents a defining moment for the disciples and for any who want to follow their teacher.

The passage also includes some translation nuances which affect how we hear it today. Mark's original readers would have gotten a different impression from it.

When Jesus asks the disciples, 'Who do people say that I am,' why does he want to know? What would he have said if they answered, 'Well, the Pharisees and scribes think you're a jerk?' But they don't. They reel off the names of popular past and present prophets: John the Baptist, Elijah, and one of the many 'other prophets.'

I don't know why people kept confusing Jesus with John, since clearly, they were separate people, besides which, John was dead. Elijah I can see. He had mysteriously disappeared, and everyone was waiting for his return on 'the great and terrible day of the Lord,' as foretold in Malachi 4:5. So, Jesus, as a prophet of God's kingdom, would be a natural fit. There are even hints that Jesus could be a prophet like Moses. The point is, for the disciples, there seems to be more to this Jesus character than he's letting on.

Then Jesus asked, 'Who do *you* say that I am?' And this is getting to the heart of it, because Peter answered immediately, 'You are *the* Messiah.'

It's kind of a trick answer. Which kind of Messiah did Peter mean? A Davidic king who would restore justice and dislodge the Romans? That kind of Messiah is a certain threat to Caesar. There were many different Jewish groups at the time who all had their own candidates and their own understanding of Messiah, and not all of them were militaristic nationalists. Some groups did not want or expect a Messiah at all. So, this might be Mark's way to begin a discussion with his congregation – given what's going on outside, should there even *be* a Messiah, and if so, what kind? Jesus addresses this problem himself in chapter 13, where he talks about false Messiahs – lots of them – who might lead the people astray – be alert.

And then Jesus 'sternly ordered' them to keep quiet – he rebuked them.

A rebuke is a warning. When Peter rebuked Jesus, he might have been expressing his concern about Jesus connecting Messiahs with suffering and death and stuff. We don't know his exact reasons for his rebuke, but he approached Jesus privately, who then turned it into a teaching moment by rebuking Peter publicly in front of the disciples.

And this is where it all turns.

Jesus called over the crowd, the ever-present crowd, to join in hearing what he had to say. By doing this, when he says, 'If *any* want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up *their* cross and follow me,' he's including any and all who might want to become part of the movement. Anyone can be a disciple.

And when he says his followers should 'deny themselves,' he doesn't mean we should put down that second donut. Have three donuts! What Jesus means is that his followers should be ready to act in a selfless way and give up their place as the center of their own personal universe.

Actually, he gives us three instructions: act selflessly; take up our own cross; and follow him as disciples willing to share the Way of Jesus, the suffering Messiah, wherever it might lead.

And why would we do that? Jesus says that what is at stake isn't just one's life, but one's *psyche* (ψυχήν), to use the original Greek word. Some English translations sometimes substitute *soul* for *life*, but Mark was referring to our inner core, what constitutes the self. There is more at issue here than our happiness on earth right now. *Psyche* conveys a spiritual dimension that means more than *life* in this world. Jesus is looking far down the road. For him, there is nothing more important than losing your *psyche* for the sake of the gospel.

When we consider who we say Jesus is for us, would we attach the same importance to saving our *psyche* by losing it as Jesus does? There's no one way to understand Jesus in the Bible, so when Jesus asked the disciples to name who he was for them, he was probably expecting twelve different answers. Jesus the Son of God is just as enigmatic as God the Almighty Creator. But we *can* speak about Jesus the wisdom teacher, or Jesus the rabbi with the healing touch, or Jesus the apocalyptic prophet. We can also talk about what we the faith community believe about Jesus' ministry and its purposes and significance for us.

Mark's faith community struggled with and against war on many sides. The Romans were the biggest, most visible, and most lethal force to worry about, but there were also Jewish enemies who argued against this minority who claimed Jesus to be the Messiah. Mark's group had always existed on the margins, and when war came, keeping the faith was hard.

And it's that way for us today as well. The world has known some form of war on every continent – save Antarctica – in every year of every decade for well over 100 years, from tribal skirmishes, land disputes, civil wars, revolutions, and full-fledged wars that twice involved the entire world. Millions of people died because of other people.

Mark wrote his Gospel, in part, to give his people hope for the future. It was a future of the 'not yet' kingdom of God where one would find justice, freedom, abundance, and peace. They fully expected the present age they were living in would soon fade away and end when Jesus returned in glory.

Every disaster is attended to by first responders who chose to be there, who signed up for it, and they're good at it. The early Christians were also noted for their willingness to voluntarily bear a cross but did it in resistance to the Powers like Rome who stood against them. It became a matter of endurance.

But it is not and never was God's intention that people should be continually at war. God intended for all the peoples to live in peace. Jesus said he would find all the lost sheep and return them to the fold, that he came to heal the sick. He lived in a world where he had to speak in parables to avoid detection when he began resisting the evil he saw around him.

The time wasn't right to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God, as the Messiah, until after he died on the Cross. The clock ran out on that long ago. Time's up. It's time now to thoughtfully consider God's purpose for us as individuals and as a faith community. Can we do more? What would Lady Wisdom say? All the prophets might tell us that we know the answers already.

Amen.

¹ Pagels, Elaine H. *The Origin of Satan*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996, 8.