

**Sermon: Predict Your Future**

New North Church, Hingham

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

According to the internet, it was either Abraham Lincoln or any of half a dozen other people who once said, “The best way to predict your future is to create it.” In any event, it’s an excellent quote and it fits in well with today’s two readings.

The reading from Mark’s Gospel is one of those passages that forces us to consider where we are going even as it reminds us that the Gospel claims every aspect of our life and being. And by that, I mean, nobody wants to hear this.

Nobody wants to know that Jesus gives us an active role in how the world should work, or that following him might bear painful consequences. Most of us would prefer a quiet, normal life, but, Jesus says, if we want to follow him, we can’t sit on the sidelines.

Okay. So, what does it mean to *save* our life if we lose it? And, going the other way, if we *lose* it for the sake of the Gospel or for Jesus, how do we save it?

Jesus says that what is at stake isn’t just one’s life or existence, but one’s *psyche* (ψυχήν), to use Mark’s original Greek word. Some English translations substitute *soul* for *life*, but *psyche* refers to our inner self, our spirit, our very being.

For Jesus, 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, to the end times. For him, there is nothing more important than risking your *psyche* for the sake of the Gospel, for his sake, for God’s sake.

We all carry our own burdens, and Jesus acknowledges this. He says, ‘take up *your* cross,’ and follow me. But if we don’t want to do that, are there alternatives? Recreational drug use? A never-ending accumulation of material possessions and the pleasures that come with the good life? Compulsive online shopping? Those are great ways to get lost *in* life. They’re also great avoidance techniques.

Jesus gives us is a choice. The Son of Man – Jesus – will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of him and his message, when the end times come. So, choose.

Why should we care if Jesus and his disciples went to ‘the villages of Caesarea Philippi?’ Why would Mark bother to mention it at all? What makes that a fact worth knowing in the story’s context?

Perhaps because it is as far north as you can go in Galilee before you get to Syria. It’s also the farthest point from Jerusalem in Mark’s Gospel, and it is the place where Jesus begins his journey to the Cross. It is here that Jesus reveals the suffering that he will undergo when he finally arrives in the city.

Another thing to notice is that Mark tends to single out Peter throughout the Gospel. Among the disciples, Peter is named first and last, and far more often than the others. He speaks for himself and sometimes for the Twelve. And whenever Jesus goes out with a select group of disciples, Peter is always included. He’s important.

But here he rebukes Jesus – privately – and later, he will deny Jesus three times. Sometimes, he is mystified by Jesus and his teachings, and he often fails as a disciple, but he’s like us in that he always gets another chance.

Peter’s failure here is in rebuking Jesus, even privately: it is not the role of a disciple to rebuke one’s teacher. His rebuke is inappropriate, and Jesus lets him know it.

But when Jesus asks the group, “Who do *you* say that I am,” Peter nails it when he answers, “You are the Christ,” the Anointed One, the Messiah. Fair enough, but his idea of a Messiah matches Israel’s expectation of a king who would restore the nation’s military honor and national glory. No one was expecting a suffering messiah.

The thing is, Jesus really is the one for whom Israel has waited all these years, but his type of ministry is so new and unusual, that no one can correlate their idea of a messiah with who Jesus is – to follow Jesus suddenly means something entirely different than following a triumphant king. Following Jesus might get you killed.

Back to Proverbs for a minute.

Wisdom cries out in the street; she raises her voice; she cries out at the busiest corner; she speaks at the entrance of the city – wherever people congregate, Wisdom is there, offering a tough-love pep talk.

In one sense, she’s not very compassionate. She said, “Because I have called and you refused, and because you have ignored my counsel, I will laugh at your calamity.”

She's annoyed too: "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. *Then* they will call upon me, but I will not answer."

After she gets her message across, she ends on a high note, saying, "but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."

The calamities and stress and anguish she is talking about have little to do with preparing for the whirlwind of Hurricane Ida, or for an as-yet unformed winter nor'easter. She's talking about protecting yourself from temptation; she's talking about loving knowledge of God over ignorance; and choosing reverence for God over everything else.

There are echoes of Lady Wisdom's speech in Mark too. Jesus said, "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Lady Wisdom said, "Listen to me and be secure and live at ease." Notice that she never says we will be *safe*, and neither does Jesus. Neither of them invites us to conversion. They simply let us know the consequences of rejection. But our *psyche* will thank us later.

This all started when Jesus asked an innocent question. Maybe he was just curious to know what people were saying. The disciples' answers were all over the place, indicating, perhaps, some confusion as to Jesus' true identity. So, he asked them a more challenging question: "Who do *you* say that I am?"

That's a good question for us to ask ourselves too. What do you say about Jesus? Who is Jesus for us? Answering these questions gives meaning to our Christian lives.

A better question for us might be, "Who do we say we are?" When life gets hard, when it places new demands on us, when suffering and pain enter our hearts, how do we respond? Do we accept Jesus' invitation to take up *our* cross, to bear the burdens of daily life, and follow him? And when life is easy, who can we help get an easy life too?

God is present in every situation. God never gives up on offering us the possibilities of the Kingdom, even if it might never arrive completely. God invites us to worship, to do justice, to love our neighbor, to freedom and peace and grace, always.

Abe Lincoln was right: we can predict the future if we so choose.

Amen.

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