

Mark 8: 27-38

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?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.’

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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.’

SERMON:

Our communal journey through Lent this year revolves, in part, around a series of questions. Last week we heard Sharon Spicher talk about her belief, and what really matters.

Just now, Connor considered 'what does God ask of us, and not ask of us'?

Lent is a time of holding these big questions. In this week, where the death toll from COVID in the United States rose about 500,000, I have been living in lament.

I find myself wondering:

What does God ask of us?

In one of his daily musings this week, spiritual director Glenn Mitchell gave this analogy to the magnitude of loss. He notes that Beaver stadium, here on the campus of Penn State, is the 4th largest stadium in the world, able to hold 106,572 roaring fans. COVID deaths in the US would fill almost 5 stadiums.

And world wide - add another 20 stadiums. All told, COVID has silenced nearly 25 stadiums worth of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, coworkers, neighbors and friends.

Suffering, and the possibility of death got real for me this week- as through Caringbridge posts I've walked beside neighborhood friends in Lancaster whose 18 year old son was discovered to have a brain tumor, and whose life is not teetering on the edge. Suffering, up close and personal, quickly brings up all the losses of our lives. Life is fragile. Life involves suffering.

And so we enter into our scripture today - where Jesus' divinity is named in one breath, and in the next, he claims the path that is his - to authentically follow God, he must suffer.

In looking at this scripture, narrative context is so important. When this passage is taken out of context, it seems to suggest that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is to suffer and die. However, when we read it within its narrative context, we come to see that the mission of Jesus and his disciples **is to give life**—knowing that earthly powers will violently oppose them.

Up until this point in Mark's gospel, things were going relatively smoothly. There were miracles, healings, feedings. There has been some conflict, but nothing too serious, Jesus has it under control. But it's here that the gospel turns darker.

Here, Peter names Jesus as the Messiah - the one to usher in the reign of God. Messiahs are victorious, powerful.

And unlike the other Gospels, here, in Mark's gospel, as soon as he's named the Messiah by Peter, Jesus sternly orders them not to tell anyone about him. Right away, he goes on to teach them not about the Messiah, but the Son of Man, sometimes translated "the human one". 'The Son of Man, this human one, he teaches them, *must* undergo great suffering and rejection.'

He **MUST** do this. NT scholar Ira Driggers says "Much depends on how we interpret the "must" of verse 31. In Greek, *dei*: 'it is necessary'". Driggers' writes:

"Too often the word is taken to mean that Jesus' mission is principally to suffer and die; that Jesus "must" go to the cross in order to affect a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins... But Mark's gospel doesn't proclaim an atonement theology... Instead we find that the overarching narrative here offers a simpler, but no less profound, explanation of Jesus' death: Jesus dies because powerful humans oppose both his healing mission and the disruption that mission brings to established law and order.

So the real epiphany of Mark 8:31 is not that Jesus' *mission* is to die, but that his faithfulness to God's healing mission will inevitably *result* in his death. In Mark's gospel, Jesus "must" die because his commitment to human healing will not falter.¹

¹ [Commentary on Mark 8:31-38](#)

Jesus is committed to “Giving life”, knowing that in doing so, the cost is sacrifice and suffering. It’s to this mission, my friends, this mission of giving life, that he calls all his disciples - back then and today.

So, as I consider this Lenten question: What does God ask of us? In this week where grief and loss and suffering feel so close, I found myself turning once again to stories for wisdom and comfort.

In her book *My Grandfather’s Blessings*², cancer physician and storyteller Rachel Naomi Remen tells of when she was 4 years old - and her grandfather, who often brought her a present when he came to visit, handed her a little paper cup. Expecting something special in it, she was disappointed when all she saw was dirt. Dirt? She wasn’t allowed to play with dirt. He put the cup on the windowsill in her bedroom - a 6th floor walkup apartment in Manhattan, making her promise that she would put a little water in the cup every day. At first it was a fun curiosity, but as the days went by and nothing changed, it got harder for that little 4 year old to remember to put water in it. Was it time to stop yet? “No, no, my little one - every day” he said, shaking his head. On one visit she tried giving the cup back, but he refused to take it, saying simply “every day my little one, every day”. Sometimes she wouldn’t remember until tucked into bed - but, she recounts, she didn’t miss a single day. And one morning, to her amazement, there were two little green leaves that hadn’t been there the night before.

She couldn’t wait to tell her grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as she was. As they admired this little miracle together he explained - life is everywhere, Rachel, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places. ‘And all it needs is water, Grandpa?’ “no, no” he answered, “all it needs is your faithfulness.”

² Remen, Rachel Naomi. 2000. *My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging*. Riverhead Books.

What does God ask of us?

Jesus calls all disciples to be bringers of life.

As Rachel's grandpa said - 'all that's needed is your faithfulness'.

Keep showing up - nurturing the kingdom of God, no matter the cost.

One more story... this one from Rabbi Ariel Burger³, author and co-founder of the Witness Institute.

He tells of a story of an experience of his teenage son -

So my son was on a trip, a semester-long program in Israel, ending with 10 days in Poland. And on this program, he made a good friend, a new friend, named Mason. On a day when they were visiting the camps, Mason disappeared for the day with one of the program leaders, refusing to tell anyone where he was going.

Eventually, Mason confided his story to Ariel's son, telling him - his grandparents were survivors; married three weeks before the deportation to Auschwitz. And in Auschwitz they were separated. Every evening they met at the fence separating the men's and the women's sides of the camps, bringing a crust of bread or an extra potato to share, relishing the few moments together.

Until one day, his grandmother was transferred to a rabbit farm on the outskirts of Auschwitz. The Nazis were doing experiments on rabbits that had to do with finding a cure for typhus. "And the rabbit farm was run by a Polish man who noticed, pretty early on, that the rabbits were getting better quality food and attention and care than the

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/ariel-burger-be-a-blessing/#transcript>

Jewish slave laborers. So he started to sneak in food for the Jewish slave laborers and the inmates.

“And then,” Mason told my son, “my grandmother cut her arm on a piece of barbed wire, and the cut became infected. And it wasn’t a serious infection, if you had antibiotics. But of course, if you were a Jew in that place, in that time, there was no way you were going to get antibiotics. So what did this Polish man who was running the rabbit farm do? He cut his own arm open, and he placed his wound on her wound so that he would get the infection that she had, and he became infected. And he went to the Nazis, and he said, ‘I’m one of your best managers. This rabbit farm is very productive. If I die, you’re gonna lose a lot of productivity. I need medicine.’ They gave him medicine, and he shared it with her. And he saved her life.”

So Mason said to my son, he said, “Where was I, when I left the other day and I disappeared? I went to see that Polish man. I went to say, thank you for my life. Thank you for my life.”

Rabbi Berger ends this story with this question:

What does it take to be the kind of person who will share someone else’s wound, in spite of all the pressure to see them as less valuable than a rabbit?

What does it take to be the kind of person who will share someone else’s wound...no matter the cost?

What does God ask of us, in this journey through Lent?

Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow. To be faithful, even in the smallest of tasks.

To be bringers of life.

Following Jesus is to bear witness to the gospel of life, in all its fullness.

My friends, I pray that we have the courage, the clarity, to carry the good news to all we meet. Amen.