

February 25, 2024
Mark 8:31-38

Lent 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The True Way”

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

For our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Susan and I took a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, a beautiful and historic town in the high desert of the American Southwest that is an artistic and cultural hub visited by millions of people every year. It was a truly memorable trip; we enjoyed all of the art galleries the town has to offer (including a museum devoted to the works of Georgia O’Keefe), we experienced the unique cuisine of New Mexico (where I discovered that green chilis are even hotter than red chilis!), and we marvelled at the desert landscape that was so different from the forested landscape of where I was born and raised. We also took a few trips outside of Santa Fe to other notable places in the northern part of the state, including the town of Taos that is another significant artists’ colony. As this was well before the advent of GPS devices that help guide a traveler to their destination, I began consulting some maps to find the best route to this community. I noticed that there were two routes that took a driver from Santa Fe to Taos, and since I was not familiar with the area, I asked our hotel clerk for recommendations. Her response at first was baffling: “Do you want to take the high road or the low road?” All I could think of was that song that promised that “I’ll be in Scotland before you,” until she explained the difference between the two. The “low road” was a fast four-lane highway that made the trip north fast and easy but did not offer any exciting vistas along the way. The “high road,” on the other hand, was a winding, sometimes treacherous mountain road that more than doubled one’s travel time. But the latter was clearly this clerk’s preference; her advice to us was “if you have time, take the high road – you won’t regret it!” On this advice, we set out on the high road. As we climbed high into the mountains on a road that at times was not well-maintained, we began to fear that our rental Kia would not survive the trip. But soon we discovered why the high road was so popular: the scenery was truly spectacular as it crossed creeks filled with clear water, small towns filled with adobe houses, and the Santa Fe National Forest with spectacular pine trees and views that went on for miles. It did take us longer to get to Taos, but the choice of this more challenging road was worth the investment in time and the challenges that the road presented us.

There are many times in our lives when we are presented with choices as to which road we may travel. It may be a literal choice of roads such as is presented to people traveling from Santa Fe to Taos; it may be the choice of two career paths that will take a person in very different directions; or it may be the choice of sharing our life with a person who we choose to marry. In the words of Robert Frost's immortal poem, *"two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by; and that has made all the difference."*

At the beginning of his ministry among God's people, Jesus invites persons to become his followers. After he has endured his ordeal of temptation in the wilderness, Jesus comes upon two sets of fishermen brothers – Simon and Andrew, James and John – and issue the invitation to *"follow me, and I will make you fish for people"* (Mark 1:17). He will later call Levi, a tax collector hated by the people of Israel for his collecting taxes for their Roman oppressors, and will continue to gather followers until he *"appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons."* (Mark 3:14-15). These followers were eyewitnesses to Jesus' preaching and teaching, to his miracles of healing and raising the dead, feeding the multitudes, and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It was to these disciples that Jesus posed the question *"who do you say that I am?"* to which Peter replied, *"You are the Messiah"* (Mark 8:29). In response to Peter's confession, Jesus *"sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him"* (8:30).

The reason for this command to silence about Jesus' messianic identity becomes apparent when Jesus *"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."* (8:31). Jesus' teaching about his passion signals a new beginning in Mark's narrative. Up until now the accent in the Gospel has been on Jesus' authority and power in his healings, casting out demons, and feeding the multitudes. From this point on, his rejection and death will be emphasized. The change is marked by the substitution of the phrase "Son of Man" for "Christ (Messiah)." In Mark, "Son of Man" is the only title Jesus uses for himself, a title that has its origins in the Old Testament book of Daniel:

- "As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." – Daniel 7:13-14.

By using this title, Jesus identifies himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and declares his sovereign freedom to define himself apart from how others may be defining him. His freedom, however, is subject to the will of God; the necessity of Jesus' passion ("must") lies in the divine ordering of history.

Even though Jesus *"said all this quite openly"* (8:32) so that all in his hearing could understand his message about his upcoming passion and death, one disciple finds Jesus' statement unacceptable and outrageous: *"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him"* Peter's prior understanding of the Messiah doubtless hindered his ability to accept Jesus' passion prediction. Peter's rebuke indicates that he has assumed that Jesus' messiahship would follow more traditional expectations of the Messiah as one who comes in kingship, might, and victory:

- "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'" – Psalm 2:7-9.

When Peter hears Jesus' words that the one he has confessed to be the Messiah must suffer and die, Peter has the audacity to take Jesus aside and "rebuke" him. Since the word "rebuke" (*epitimaō*) has previously been used in Mark to refer to the silencing of demons (*"But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'"* – 1:25), Peter appears to have fallen into the same trap as some of Jesus' relatives: he thinks that Jesus is insane and needs to be exorcised. The verbs "took him" and "began to rebuke him" also express superiority and authority; a disciple taking such a tone with his teacher would have horrified people at this time. *"Peter tries to behave like a patron, not a disciple"* (Lamar Williamson, Jr.) – but Jesus will not be patronized. He responds to Peter's attempt to rebuke him by *"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'"* (8:33). Jesus' stern rebuke of Peter should not be taken as evidence of hostility toward Peter; both the Gethsemane tradition and the tradition of Jesus at prayer show that Peter's protest may express a struggle that Jesus himself underwent in confronting his fate:

- "And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'" – Mark 14:35-36.
- "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was

heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” – Hebrews 5:7-10.

Jesus’ command that Peter “*get behind me, Satan*” recalls his temptation in the wilderness following his baptism: “*He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*” (1:13). The command to “*get behind me*” also reminds Peter where disciples belong: “*Disciples are not to guide, protect, or possess Jesus; they are to follow him*” (Williamson). In his passion prediction, Jesus clearly indicates that he is the Messiah of God, not the Messiah of human expectations; Peter and anyone who would be his follower must set their mind on divine things, not human things; they must pray that “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” The imperative that the Son of Man “*must undergo great suffering*” (*dei*, “it is necessary”) conveys the idea of a divinely established plan. The authority associated with “Son of Man” is retained because Jesus suffers out of obedience to God; the necessity is grounded in God and cannot be evaded:

- “He said to them, “Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt?” – 9:12.
- “For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.” – 14:21.

After this tense exchange with Peter, Jesus summons the crowd before beginning instruction about discipleship and suffering. His opening statement refers to the conditions of discipleship and the ongoing reality of Christian life: “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” (8:34). The invitation to follow Jesus is not redefined in the shadow of the cross; “*Jesus invites all who will to come, but to come after him*” (Williamson). The threefold condition of discipleship – deny self, take up one’s cross, and follow Jesus – is a single condition. The rigor of this demand is spelled out in the four following sayings; potential followers must be ready and willing to suffer as Jesus suffered, losing their lives in order to gain them. Followers of the one whose way leads to the Cross above all must learn that they too must be willing to walk in the way of their Lord, endure what he endured, sacrificed what he sacrificed, and follow him in the path that leads to Golgotha – but also leads to the empty tomb and the promise of

resurrection and new life. Fidelity to Jesus brings persecution, because the disciples live in an age that is contrary to God. Jesus warns that “*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 God with the holy angels*” (8:38), words that echo the teachings of prophets of the Old Testament:

- “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!” – Isaiah 1:4.
- “Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come; yet you have the forehead of a whore, you refuse to be ashamed.” – Jeremiah 3:3.

The image of the Son of Man that Jesus presents to his would-be followers holds out both a promise and a warning. Those who confess Jesus to be Messiah and Son of God must be faithful disciples. They cannot expect the gospel to match the desires and demands of larger society. Those remain faithful can be confident that they will be among the elect on the day of judgment.

- “The disciples have participated in Jesus’ ministry of preaching and healing. Now they discover that they must also participate in the ministry of suffering. Anyone who attempts to call the world to account before the gospel must be ready to sacrifice self-interest. The gospel is not formulated for the convenience of those who would preach it to others.” – PHEME PERKINS.

Jesus’ encounter with Peter and his teaching on discipleship are the basis for one of the most important teachings of Martin Luther, his “theology of the cross.” Peter’s response, and Jesus’ subsequent teaching, highlight Luther’s contrast between the “theology of the cross” (*theologia crucis*) and what he referred to as a “theology of glory” (*theologia gloriae*). Luther spells out the difference between these two contrasting theologies in his *Heidelberg Disputation*, written one year after his famous *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences (Ninety-Five Theses)* in 1517:

- The one who beholds what is invisible of God, through the perception of what is made, is not rightly called a theologian. But rather the one who perceives what is visible of God, God’s ‘backside,’ by beholding the sufferings and the cross. The ‘theologian of glory’ calls the bad good and the good bad. The ‘theologian of the cross’ says what a thing is.” – Theses 19-21.

A “theology of glory” confirms what people want in a god; the “theology of the cross” contradicts everything that people imagine what God should be. For Luther, to know God truly is to know God in Christ, which means to know God hidden in suffering. The *theologia crucis* knows God only in Christ, and him crucified. Peter’s rebuke to Jesus’ passion prediction is an example of a “theology of glory” that can only imagine the Messiah as a conquering warrior that lives up to human expectations of the anointed one of God. In his rebuke of Peter, Jesus condemns his audacious disciple because he set his mind “*not on divine things*” – God’s Will accomplished through Jesus’ death on the cross – “*but on human things,*” a “theology of glory.”

- “In summary, Luther’s theology of the cross means that the cross conceals God and thus marks the end of all speculation about God on the part of self-confident reason. The cross is the symbol of judgment over man and thus marks the end of all achieving of fellowship with God on the part of self-confident moralistic man. The cross makes itself available only to experience; more accurately: only to the suffering of God prepared by him for us through and with Christ.” – Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*

A disciple is by definition a follower, one who strives to hear the Word of God and then to live and walk in obedience to God’s teachings and commandments. Disciples do not define how they are to live; their path is defined by Christ’s teachings and Christ’s example. One who is to abide in Jesus is one who walks in the way of the Lord; it is for this reason that followers of Jesus were originally known as followers of The Way, long before they were known as Christians:

- “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” – Acts 9:1-2.

Taking the “high road” to Taos was a far more challenging and at times harrowing trip than the ease of the “low road,” but it resulted in a trip that we still remember and cherish. The Word of God calls us to “*come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!*” It will not be an easy path, nor will it be the way of our own choosing; but only in following in the Way of the Lord will we find that we are walking in the True Way, following the one who is the True Messiah whose path does not fulfill human expectations of glory but fulfills God’s Will in suffering and death so that we might be freed from the powers of sin and death and be born anew to a living hope through

the one who is “*the way, and the truth, and the life.*” (John 14:6). May we choose the “road less traveled by,” for that will make all the difference!

Amen.