

## Lent is...

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Mark 8: 27–38

This morning we'll meet Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, where Peter's confession serves as a kind of literary doorway between the first and second halves of Mark's gospel.

The first eight chapters of Mark focus on who Jesus *is*, and they are action packed with miracles and healings. Peter's confession comes as a sort of turning point, shifting the narrative to the second half of the book, where Jesus tells us the *why* as we head toward Jerusalem and his death and resurrection.

Hear now how God is speaking to you through these words of scripture this morning.

### **Mark 8: 27–38**

<sup>27</sup>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?'

<sup>28</sup>And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'

<sup>29</sup>He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'\*<sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he (Jesus) rebuked Peter and said,

‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

<sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>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. AMEN.

On this second Sunday in Lent, we come face-to-face with difficult and challenging words from Jesus. He speaks to the disciples, and to us, of the huge mysteries of life and death, suffering and redemption and where true life is found. His words are something that we wrestle with throughout our lives, taking on new meanings at different stages along the way.

The passage we just read surely gives me pause and is one that I would just as soon not have to deal with. Honestly, I’d rather reflect on Jesus’ words, “Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest.” Or, “Don’t worry about tomorrow, tomorrow has enough troubles of it’s own.” Those words bring me comfort.

As people of faith, we need always to keep in mind the totality of the Biblical narrative, all that Jesus said and did. Jesus’ specific words for today stir something deep within.

First, Peter – so bold, so human – like that kid in the front row who always has his hand up first. After telling Jesus that indeed, he IS the

Christ, Jesus proceeds to shatter Peter's understanding of what that identity is all about. The Christ, the anointed one, the one Israel hoped would come to save them must suffer? Be rejected? Die? Surely not. That isn't the kind of Messiah Peter understands. Jesus is different, not a military hero, exercising power over others, but a savior who uses the power of love and forgiveness.

Peter's rebuke of Jesus seems reasonable, given the circumstances. After giving up his fishing business, following after Jesus the itinerant preacher, witnessing miracles, healings and teachings, he didn't want his master to suffer any more than we'd want a loved one to suffer, any more than we want to suffer ourselves.

Peter is so taken aback to learn of Jesus' future rejection and suffering that he doesn't hear the part that comes next... after three days Jesus will rise again. And this is Jesus' promise and hope... that God will raise him up on the third day.

Let us never forget: love wins.

Then it is Jesus' turn to rebuke Peter, and he calls the disciples and gathers a crowd to teach about what it means to follow him.

He asks us to shift our minds from dwelling on human things to divine things. That being Jesus' disciples means letting go of those things that keep us from God, ourselves and others. That we must die to old ways of thinking and being in order to open ourselves to rebirth into new possibilities.

In Jesus, we see the divine way is love, humility, compassion, justice, reconciliation and non-violence. Faith cannot grow in the frantic rush of possessing, controlling, consuming and striving.

Lent 2021 arrives in the midst of a complex and hurting world. It feels kind of tender to talk about Lent this year... the second year in a row that

we are experiencing Lent during the pandemic. Nearly one year ago, as a human family we were cast into the wilderness, stripped of our illusion of self-sufficiency and pushed to redefine what it means to be community. We have known grief on an almost daily basis, personal and collective. This week our country reached the grim milestone of 500,000 lives lost to COVID-19, among over 2.2 million deaths world-wide. We have experienced righteous anger over society's inequities and disappointment in leadership at all levels. So much suffering, loss and uncertainty.

In this time, too, we have mastered new skills, practiced patience, learned much about our city and world, and about ourselves. We have been made aware of our interdependence. We have mourned the loss of loved ones, and welcomed new life. We have been generous givers, and have lived into gratitude. We have found beauty in unexpected places. We have trusted that God unites us in spirit while we must be physically apart.

The word Lent isn't in the bible. It's something that was developed by the church in ancient times.

BBT writes that when the world didn't end the way Jesus said it would, his followers stopped expecting so much of God or from themselves. Little by little, they became devoted to their comforts instead: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. So the church called her people back to their senses. Looking at the Bible, they saw that it offered clues that led to lives of holiness... Israel spent 40 years wandering in the desert before trusting God, Elijah spent 40 days in the mountains learning to listen for the still small voice of God, and we know that Jesus himself spent 40 days in the wilderness, relying on God and growing strong. It wasn't easy, but they made it, and were

transformed. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, pgs. 65-66).

Thus, our 40 days of Lent. Days set aside for spiritual growth and practice, time to grow closer to God. I wanted to offer just a couple of reflections about this holy time.

I'm grateful that Dale is our guest jazz pianist today, because as I thought about it, it seems that jazz is a lot like Lent. One of the unique aspects of jazz is improvisation. When Dale improvises, he relies on his years of training, his ear, and his heart to lead the way musically. My understanding is that one begins with a melody as foundation and then take off from there, transforming the music in the moment without a plan – making it up as one goes. As listeners, we do not know what where the music will take us next and we can be surprised and delighted. It may tap into experiences of sadness and loss, or even joy and evocative memories. Every musician improvises differently.

Ash Wednesday lays our foundation for Lent. On that day, we are reminded that our lives on earth are finite, that we are broken, we are beautiful, we are forgiven. We are God's beloved. And beloved is where we begin. From this base, we can trust God more fully and step into the unknown. Henri Nouwen writes that in our lives many voices compete for our attention, telling us we somehow need to prove our worth, or feel ashamed for who we are, or that the only thing that matters is popularity, success and power. But that beneath these noisy voices is God's voice, saying, "You are my Beloved." Nouwen says that listening to that voice is our prayer and the best way to connect to that voice is in stillness.

– Henri J.M. Nouwen,

[Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith](#)

Stillness and prayer look different for everyone. I struggled to find authenticity in my spiritual practices amidst pressure from other voices.

As a young adult, I so wanted to “get Lent” right, I longed to become more holy, more spiritual. Each Lent I would try a different practice. One year I fasted one day a week, in secret, of course, as Jesus said, another I woke each day at 5:30 am to pray out loud for 30 minutes. One year I quit eating chocolate and the next I stopped watching television. Still another year I pledged to do a good deed each day, and many years I started, but never stuck with journals. This yearly season of what I now call holy frantic activity only frustrated me. These time-honored practices that were life-giving for others simply weren’t for me. Though I tried to tell myself otherwise, I think I focused on getting it rather than listening to God. I wanted to say just the right prayers and do the right things. And each year, when Easter arrived, I didn’t feel any different, more holy, or whole, or more at one with God, I simply felt like a failure and a fraud.

Then my mother died just before Ash Wednesday. That year, after having had enough of what for me were performative Lenten practices, I would declare to anyone who would listen that I was giving up my mom for Lent.

Throughout those Lenten weeks I did all my “normal tasks” – you know the running kids around, teaching preschool, attending worship, cooking, shopping, volunteering – I did them through a fog of grief. I didn’t gloss over or deny my sadness, just the opposite. I leaned into the loss. I felt what I felt without judgement or shame. And God met me in that grief those late winter weeks, both with angels (like the ones Anne mentioned last week), offering food and conversation, and holy almost supernatural moments of peace and joy. This grace slowly awakened a deeper compassion for myself and others, all God’s beloved, who suffer.

If Lent feels particularly lent-y to you this year, you are not alone. It continues to be a time of challenge and struggle for nearly all of us. Yet we can be confident that God meets us where we are, holding and leading us forward in hope as we wrestle with the great mysteries of faith, together.

We will soon gather virtually for our annual meeting, a time to affirm our connection, to share our learnings and losses and celebrate the ministry we accomplished by God's grace, last year. We will give thanks for the past and pray for our year ahead.

Friends, seasons change. Easter is coming, and there will be joy in the morning. Thanks be to God. AMEN.