

God Keeps His Promises

Our God is a promise-keeping God. Abraham and Sarah were 100 years old when Isaac was born – they were as good as dead, but God fulfilled the promise He had made to them over a decade earlier anyway. At some point in our lives, we too, were as good as dead, and then along comes Jesus, keeping His promise to give us a new, transformed life – accomplished by Him on the cross. God’s economy is remarkable – we touched on this some last week – we don’t get what we deserve, rather He gives us His very best. He swaps all our sin and junk for His righteousness and right-standing with the Father.

On this second Sunday of the Lenten season, we’ll look at a few brief verses from the Gospel of Mark. Before we do, I want to frame today’s reading into the bigger picture of what’s going on with Jesus and His disciples. Jesus and the apostles have been going around healing people, giving sight to the blind, casting out demons, feeding huge crowds beside the Sea of Galilee – Jesus is doing amazing stuff! Just prior to what we’re going to look at this morning, Jesus has asked His disciples “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27), and they give Him the rundown of what people are saying. It’s during this conversation that Peter says, “You are the Messiah,” (verse 30). With Peter’s declaration of Jesus being the Messiah in mind, let’s look at Mark 8:31-38 together. **Read Mark 8:31-38.**

Mental Image Doesn’t Match Reality

It’s quite the shocking Lenten journey to see Peter go from acknowledging the truth about Jesus, as Messiah, to doing what he does here, isn’t it? Clearly, he does – and doesn’t – “get it.” His mental image of what the Messiah will do is in stark contrast to what Jesus describes for the Son of Man, as He calls Himself in Mark’s account. Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again,” (verse 31).

Jesus, God-with-us, knows exactly what must happen for our redemption to occur – and He tells the disciples what will happen to Him. Mark even records, “He spoke plainly about this,” (verse 32a). Of course, we see Peter’s reaction to what Jesus says. “Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him,” (verse 32b).

We can understand Peter’s mix up here. As Amy Grant sang back in the early 1980’s in her song, *El Shaddai*, “Through the years You’ve made it clear, That the time of Christ was near, Though the people couldn’t see What Messiah ought to be. Though Your word contained the plan, They just could not understand, Your most awesome

work was done, Through the frailty of Your Son.”¹ Peter’s a product of his time and culture. He had a mental image which was the same as every other Jewish person after generations of waiting for the Messiah. It just goes to show us how easy it is to get things wrong along the way – it may lead us to be so overconfident in our expectations that we also rebuke God.

Peter Rebukes God

Peter rebukes God. It’s sad to say, but that’s what Peter does here. The rebuke he gives to Jesus is the same thing Jesus does to unclean spirits in Mark 1:25 and 9:25, and to the storm in Mark 4. But it’s also how Jesus tells people to not say anything about the miracles they’ve experienced in Mark 3:12 and 8:30. It’s a word that shows the person saying it means business!

For Peter, the “business” model he’s using is all wrong. And Jesus turns it into what we call a “teachable moment.” First, He looks around at all the disciples then says directly to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns,” (verse 33). Basically, Jesus is telling Peter here to get back in line because he has no idea what he’s talking about. Peter needs to listen because, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus’ words, Peter “has no idea how God works.”

This is precisely the journey we take each Lenten season – realizing that we don’t really have any idea on how God works – and needing to turn to Jesus on His journey to the cross so that we learn a little bit more about His grace. The next thing Jesus does is expand the audience. “Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me,’” (verse 34). See, Jesus draws the crowd into the “teachable moment.” Being His follower means letting go of our own ideas and doing the life of faith Jesus’ way.

Making God in Our Image

I’ve heard it said before, something to the effect that if God shares all our views on things, we haven’t found Him. We aren’t following Him if He thinks the same things that we do. The Prophet Isaiah once wrote, “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts,’” (Isa. 55:8-9). He’s so high above us, that for anyone to presume to know the mind of God is laughable.

My point is, that if we worship a God who thinks like us, shares all our views, likes the same politicians and dislikes the same groups of people that we do – we’re not following the God of the Bible – we’re following an idol. We’ve made God in our

¹ Grant, Amy, *El Shaddai*, 1982.

image, instead of the other way around. Jesus tells His followers three big things in this passage today. If we want to follow Him, we must deny ourselves – Peter probably wondered what Jesus meant by that – there are folks today who wonder what Jesus meant by that. We must take up our cross – Peter knew exactly what that was! And we must follow – and that’s hard for us, where we so often get fixated on the cultural idea that we’re called to lead. We’re called to follow Jesus – not lead. There’s a huge difference!

For the Sake of the Gospel

Look what else Jesus says, “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it,” (Mark 8:35). At least one Bible translation has this verse read, “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,” (NRSV). The good news of redemption through Jesus Christ is a precious gift, which is meant to be shared. We must lose in order to gain and realize that gaining doesn’t always mean winning. Jesus uses the imagery of the cross – which was something everyone listening to Him on that day could immediately picture. They knew what it meant. Someone carrying a cross is on their way to die. A cross-bearing person was condemned by the powers of this world as a threat too dangerous, too disruptive, too much of a nuisance to keep around.

People condemned to death by the Roman Empire are condemned because they won’t – or they can’t – conform. See, the Jewish people – Peter included – wanted a Messiah to free them from Rome. They had this preconceived idea that Jesus would come and knock the Romans back into the Stone Age. Instead, they get – we get – a Messiah who lays His own life down for us.

Jesus asks the crowd – and us – some good questions towards the end of today’s lesson. He says, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels,” (verses 36-38).

Jesus’ Way Flips the World on its Head

See friends, the way Jesus does things flips the world on its head. The cross of Christ continues to carry an upside-down meaning. It ought to shape our understanding of what it means to suffer, and how we define what our “crosses” are as His followers. At its core, it’s to be out of sync to the ways that keep the world humming along as the “adulterous and sinful generation,” that He speaks of in today’s reading. It’s to be like Jesus was, and thus, to live differently. It’s a clash with the powers that be – but one waged with dangerous meekness and lived according to its own standards.

When Jesus says that the suffering Son of Man will be ashamed of those who were ashamed of Him when He comes again, do you think He's talking about those of us who continuously respond like Peter did? If we keep looking to measures or standards that Christ rejects, we've fallen out of line with the Messiah. Where does our definition of power come from? What do we think the Messiah will do for us? Do we have any idea of how God actually works?

The Lenten season is a time to take such an inventory. Why are we following Jesus? How are we following Him? Who approves – or benefits – from the ways we are living our lives? What does modern condemnation of the way we live our lives look like? Answering these sorts of questions may help us consider whether we're losing our lives, or if we're trying to gain the whole world.

Deny Self, Take up our Cross, Follow Him

Think again about Peter. He thought God would match might-for-might. All the Jewish people did in those days. They thought God would overwhelm the political power and military forces of the world with His own heavenly army. They wanted a Savior who would establish supremacy in the way the world appeared to work.

In a way, Jesus did. He matched might-for-might, but in an upside-down sort of way. At His birth in Bethlehem, He was unknown and entered the filth of human experience. He was surrounded by the manure of a stable on the day He was born. Can you imagine how unsanitary giving birth in such a place as that would be?

At the end He appears to lose by dying on the cross. They even heckle Him at the cross. "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! Come down from the cross, if You are the Son of God" (Matt. 27:40). Through it all, Jesus shows that He lives by a different standard – a non-worldly, and completely righteous standard. The only people who have a chance to really understand are the ones who try His way of losing for themselves. To be out of sync with the patterns of this world – sometimes even the patterns and preferences of the modern Church – and to seek Him and His good news is the only way we can do the three things He tells us to do this morning. Deny ourselves. Take up our crosses. And follow Him.

Prayer: Father God, we talk much about faith, but are slow to take its risks, We desire forgiveness, but are slow in giving it. We praise truth, but fudge our own integrity. We revel in Your love, yet place conditions on loving others. We urge others to hope, but we live like cynics. We honor the cross of Christ, but we avoid our own. Forgive us, Lord, for our individual betrayals of the Gospel we claim to follow. By Your Holy Spirit enter each soul and cleanse, counsel, and reform us. Forgive us repeatedly, until forgiveness is such a part of us that it becomes our way of life in dealing with those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.