

March 1, 2015
2nd Sunday in Lent, Year B
Mark 8:31-38

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Have you ever had the experience of hearing a melody, or a bit of a song in your head, and it just seems to take lodge in your mind, playing over and over and over again? That happened to me this past week. And though it has happened before, this time was different. This time I found myself, at one and the same time, both convicted and consoled by what I was hearing. Here's a bit of it:

***“In the morning when I rise,
In the morning when I rise,
In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus.
Give me Jesus, give me Jesus.
You may have all this world - give me Jesus.”***

Now, I think the Spirit has been up to something here, bringing this spiritual to my mind and heart throughout the week. As it happens, I have been keeping close company with the disciple Peter. And as I sat again with Peter's story, I saw that early on in his life as a disciple, Peter comes to a crisis point. He is forced to grapple with who Jesus is, and even more importantly, who he will allow Jesus to become for him. We have to back up a bit to see how Peter's crisis begins. In the passage just before this morning's gospel reading, Jesus has polled the disciples to find out what people are saying about him. [John the Baptist/Elijah/one of the prophets]. Jesus moves the question in a decidedly more personal direction and says to them, "But who do YOU say that I am?" As Mark records it, the only one to speak up is Peter, who says, "You are the Messiah".

Now let's just hit the pause button here for a moment. All his life Peter has been taught about the promised coming of the Messiah. Messiah will be a strong and mighty king,

following in the line of King David. Messiah will restore Israel to its place of prominence as God's chosen people. Messiah will deliver them, once and for all, by overthrowing their oppressors, which at the time of Peter and Jesus was the Roman government. Peter has had this "AHA" moment and tells Jesus, "You're the One; you're God's promised One." Can you imagine how thrilled Peter must be at that moment, and the anticipation building in him about the golden days that are about to come? Things are finally going to be made right! How awesome - to have such a longed-for hope fulfilled - right before your very eyes! Peter has to be feeling just about on top of the world.

But then . . . but then Jesus starts to talk about things to come, to teach them what will happen to him. **Great suffering. Rejection by religious leaders. Being killed. Rising on the third day.** And by the time Jesus gets to the part about rising on the third day, Peter has stopped listening. Recoiling, Peter takes Jesus aside to correct him. *"No way, Lord. No way will such harm come to you. I won't let it. I'll protect you with my own life."*

Peter's sensibilities as a faithful Jew have been directly challenged, and not only challenged, but offended. There is just no room in Peter's worldview for the Messiah to suffer. His cherished convictions tell him that if anything, Messiah would inflict suffering on others. The Almighty God of Israel does NOT suffer, and certainly does NOT DIE.

Jesus' response to Peter cuts to the heart. **"Get behind me, Satan!"** What is going on here? Peter is not an evil man. He is a faithful and devout Jew, and he has very strong preconceptions about who the Messiah will be, and how Messiah will act. But with this sharp response from Jesus, Peter starts to be a very perplexed and troubled man. A shocked and frightened man. The first crack in Peter's version of reality begins to creep into consciousness. It is just the way that the tiniest crack in a windshield, over time, develops tiny fissures that spread, like so many tiny fingers fanning out. And as the pressure continues to build, eventually the glass shatters into a thousand little pieces.

This is the process that has been set in motion in Peter. His heart is being broken. There's no other way to say it. With Jesus' words about what is to come, Peter's hopes have been crushed. He has been disappointed by God.

My hunch is that most of us are pretty reluctant to name it when we have felt disappointed by God. But haven't there been times when we really want God to show up, act swiftly and decisively, and make things right? Times when we wonder – *Just where IS God right now? What is God doing to help me?* This isn't wrong; it's human instinct to ask these questions when disappointments come: when we learn a beautiful child has autism; our beloved partner is sick unto death; a precious relationship crumbles; a cherished job – and with it much of our identity – is eliminated. These are real losses that bring in their wake deep grief.

I have a dear friend, Merry Hope, who in her mid-30s walked with her husband Bob through a diagnosis and life changed by an inoperable brain tumor. Both Merry Hope and Bob were devout Christians. But, of course, we know that being a Christian does not inoculate any of us against heartbreak, disappointment, or death. We know how it sometimes plays out – despite the best medical care, the most aggressive and effective treatments, despite being grounded in faith and wrapped in the prayers of family and many friends – well, in less than a year, Bob died. They had been married for 6 years. Sometime later, a few years after Bob's death, Merry Hope and I were talking about how tough it is to listen for God's leading in your life. She said to me: ***“You know, Carenda, at one point after Bob died, I said to God: ‘I don't trust you.’”*** I was stunned by her candor. She had never said much to me about her intimate conversations with God during or after Bob's illness and death. But you know, her words have stayed with me, and they have even strengthened me in my own walk, especially at points when I've been anxious and struggling to trust God with some part of my life. We want God to act in clear and powerful ways. We want a strong God who sets things right. We want life to be fair, but it's not.

- PAUSE -

The disciple Peter will eventually come to experience the hard truth, the same truth with which we wrestle: in Jesus, we get not the God we want, but the God we need. Not a fair God, but a gracious and merciful, self-emptying God. A God who sheds glory and joins us in our humanness. A God who leaves heaven to be with us in places that are our hells-on-earth. A God who abandons strength - at least strength as the world defines it - to join us, embrace us, love, and save us in our weakness.

Part of what captured me in that spiritual as it flowed in and out of my mind and heart this week, is the reality, that, for those African Americans who lived in enslavement - treated as property, and as less than human - many connected deeply with the Jesus of Christianity. Their spirituals give voice to the longing for deliverance, and an utter confidence, an extremely personal identification with Jesus, and the recognition that he was **for them and with them**. Jesus – betrayed, bound, bruised and broken. Jesus - their brother and friend. Jesus - a Savior who joined them in their suffering. In the wounded and crucified One, in Jesus, they knew a God who understood their devastation, met them in it, and whom they trusted to bring them through it. This is the very same God who knows and meets all of us at the points of our brokenness and forsakenness.

More and more I'm coming to see that the hard work of maturing as a disciple of Jesus is about moving beyond the initial, simple childlike stage of faith, to grow in learning to walk with fidelity - with faithfulness - no matter what storms and trials life brings. There is a good reason that Jesus went off by himself to pray so often. He needed God's sustaining presence and strength. One of the gifts that Lent brings to us is the invitation to be courageous. To be courageous enough to become vulnerable with God in prayer, to lay out everything on our hearts, to be willing to say even those unthinkable things, like "God, I don't trust you." Being a disciple means growing in intimacy with God, and intimacy means **going on to higher and deeper levels of personal truth-telling**.

Life IS difficult, and life IS messy. And thankfully, WE don't have to wait until we've got it all neat, tidy, and together before we turn to God, before we turn to the faith

community for support and comfort, because God has already turned toward us in Jesus. We can freely run to God in our need, and we can turn to this gathering of the faithful when life is a mess and we're falling apart. God will stay with us and love us through our disappointments, until we come out on the other side to resurrected faith. Remember that you have the opportunity today during the Eucharist to receive prayers for healing and strength. Those loving prayers are available ANY TIME you ask for them. Blessing CAN come through brokenness. Healing CAN come through pain. Wholeness CAN come through grief. New life DOES come through death. This is the mystery of the cross. It begins with sacrificial love rooted in God's promise to be for us, then, makes its way through life and death, to resurrected hope, new life, and eternal joy.

SO BE BOLD, THEN, FRIENDS, AND PRAY ON. PRAY ON! *Jesus meets us in prayer, and here at his table to strengthen us for the journey.*

AMEN.

