

Rev. Jerry Deck
Mark 15:22 – 41

March 29, 2015

ROOTS The Sun Stops Shining

One of the worst parts of parenting, I believe, is that you rarely ever get to watch a television show or a movie at home without being interrupted again and again. We'll settle down and start watching something and before you know it Liesel is crying and Megan and I will look at each other with dismay, rock, paper, scissor who has to go check on her, hit the pause button and wait around for the person to get back. Then we settle down, try to remember where we were in the movie, what just happened, hit play and then a few minutes later Adelle will yell out that she has to go to the bathroom. So, we hit the pause button and the other person will go and, pardon the image, wipe our child, and then come back, remember where we are and start again. Then a few minutes later Wynnie will scream out that she's lost her pacifier and so the whole process begins again. The point is that we're always getting interrupted which forces us to try and remember again where we were in the movie, who this person or that person is, and on and on. It's really, really hard to get into the flow, to catch all the nuances of a movie when you're constantly starting and stopping again.

In some ways I think that's what happens when it comes to scripture. Obviously we only read bits and pieces of scripture here on Sunday mornings before pausing and then coming back the next week and then pausing again and on and on. We're always getting interrupted. For that reason, like in the case of the gospel of Mark, we don't always get everything that's going on. It was probably meant to be read or listened to in one sitting and so when we keep getting interrupted we simply miss things that we wouldn't if we just sat down and listened to it all in one fell swoop.

Sometimes it means that we miss out on understanding of the main themes of a book of the Bible. One of which we see today and I'd like us to look at. Here we've reached the final chapter of the story and Mark begins describing the crucifixion. The people surrounding Jesus don't understand what he's saying when he yells out, "*Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabbachtani.*" They think he's yelling out for Elijah and so they start mocking him about Elijah coming down to rescue him. Then, when Jesus dies we are told that the veil in the temple is torn. Now there's some discussion as to which curtain it is, but it should be noted that one of those curtains has the heavens embroidered on it (just keep that in mind). Then, the centurion at the cross declares, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Now there's a lot to think about in that part of the story, but one of the questions is whether or not you hear another story told earlier by Mark in this story. If we go back to the beginning of Mark's gospel, all the way back to chapter one, Mark tells us about the baptism of Jesus. We talked about this text a couple of months ago now. Who is it that baptizes Jesus? John the Baptist, of course. And in Mark who does

Jesus compare John the Baptist to? Elijah. Then, as you may recall, Mark says that the heavens were “torn apart” just as the veil in the temple (perhaps the one with the heavens embroidered on it) were torn apart. So one of the themes we see in Mark is this sense that God, in Jesus, has come after us. In the baptism and the death of Jesus, that forgiveness, God has full access to us.

But then there is another parallel between these two bookends. God says what at Jesus’ baptism? “This is my son.” God lets everyone know at the beginning that Jesus is God’s son and yet do you know when the first time is that a human being says that Jesus is God’s Son? And so, as Wesley Allen points out, one of the key themes that run throughout the gospel of Mark is how Jesus is God’s son and everyone, even the disciples, seem to struggle to understand that.

Remember in the 4th chapter where Jesus and the disciples are in the boat when all of a sudden a storm comes up and starts battering them around? Then after yelling at Jesus to help them, Jesus stands up yells out be still and all of a sudden the wind and the waves stop. And what do the disciples say? “Who is this man?!” (He’s the Son of God!)

Then in the 8th chapter, Peter seems to be getting at who Jesus is because he tells Jesus he thinks he’s the Christ, but in the very next passage Jesus rebukes Peter as Satan because Peter doesn’t understand fully because he doesn’t believe that Jesus must suffer. So, Peter understands Jesus partially, but certainly not in full. In fact, as someone has pointed out, when Peter denies Jesus three times after arrested, saying that he, ‘never knew Jesus,’ Peter might actually not be lying. He really didn’t yet know him.

And then in the 10th chapter we see James and John come up to Jesus and ask him to do something for them. And what did they want him to do? To agree to sit at his left and his right when he comes in glory. In other words, they saw Jesus and the coming kingdom as being a place of power and privilege. Which is why Jesus went on to tell them that when people and rulers get power how quickly it goes to their heads and that it should not be this way with them. In fact, whoever wants to be first, must be a slave. That he came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life away.

And to make that point even more clear in our passage today Mark gives us this great image of what it means to be at Jesus’ left and right. In great contrast to being in power or control or esteem it means dying on the cross next to Jesus. Again, they don’t fully understand who Jesus is.

I mean the disciples get bits and pieces of who Jesus is, but no one understands that he is the Son of God until, of course, the centurion. There he is standing at the cross, watching Jesus breathe his last and he is the one who finally, finally, gets it right. One of the questions that this scene usually provokes is why exactly the centurion came to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Was it because of the darkness that

surrounded his death or the way in which he handled his mockers or perhaps he could hear the veil in the temple tear? We don't know, of course, because Mark doesn't tell us. Yet perhaps, as Mark so often does, he gives us just exactly what we need to know. Which is that to really understand Jesus we have to see him through the lens of the cross. Any other understanding of Jesus and his kingdom that is not understood in the light of the cross is, as Paul might say, like seeing through a glass darkly.

But, of course, it is difficult to understand Jesus in this way. Because, truth be told, nothing else works like that. It's the powerful who get things, it is the strong who are victorious, it is the leaders who are glorified, it is the ones who live with great accomplishment, not the ones who die on a cross, who we honor. The disciples couldn't figure Jesus out because he worked so dramatically different than anyone else they had seen.

And the reality, it seems to me, is that so often, even though we know the story in its' completion, we modern day disciples also struggle with understanding Jesus in the light of the cross. I think that most of us, including myself, are more comfortable being Mark 8 Christians or Mark 10 Christians. We follow Jesus and yet we struggle with understanding what it means that he suffered. We get Jesus one moment but then it's clear we don't quite get him the next. So often I think we struggle with becoming Mark 15 Christ followers, whose lives are clearly shaped by the cross and by the Jesus who died on the cross. It's just so radically different.

Now hear me again, I'm not saying we don't believe in Jesus or we aren't disciples. I am simply pointing out how it is really, really hard to come to a deep understanding and to follow the crucified Jesus we see in Mark 15. And while it is certainly difficult to understand the Mark 15 crucified Jesus, I think it is absolutely critical that we at least wrestle with it perhaps more than we often do. What does it mean for us and our lives that we serve a crucified Lord? How should we live differently because of that?

And there's no better time to ask those questions than when we're entering into Holy Week. Rather than rushing to Easter we can take the time to ask what it means to follow the Jesus whose victory came, not in worldly or political success, but on a cross as the suffering servant. What's it mean to us that Jesus was virtually silent when he was unjustly accused. That he took beatings rather than flee or turn the whip. That he asked for forgiveness for others rather than vengeance. That he served and died for all, even his enemies. I'm not sure we think about that much in our day-to-day lives and Holy Week is a remarkable opportunity for us to think about this most countercultural way of living and dying. What does it look like for us to carry our cross?

Perhaps this is also a good time for us to think about this because of the week that just was here in Indiana. Now I realize that this is incredibly dicey ground for me to be covering and I went back and forth on whether I should say something or just be

quiet. Politics are a dangerous playground for pastors and by and large I think it wise to stay away. And so let me be clear that my comments this morning are not an indication of how I feel about the Religious Freedom Act one way or the other. I'd be happy to talk to you about that in another setting, perhaps across the table from one another over a meal or coffee, but not right here and right now.

The question I have for us this morning is not actually on the rightness or wrongness of this law, but in wondering whether or not the way in which Christians (on the left and the right) are battling over this is truly in light of the cross of Christ. I could be wrong here, but it feels to me like oftentimes what is happening is that Jesus followers, on the left and the right are lobbing back and forth words like justice and holiness and freedom and rights like they're James and John sitting around at the table in God's glory rather than hanging on crosses next to him. I just wonder if we are having these conversations over these sensitive issues in a battle for power rather than from a position of weakness and servitude. I realize that that may not make sense, so as I thought about what it might look like to engage these issues through the lens of the cross I thought that perhaps one thing we could do is make sure that we are asking important cross-like questions that we can only answer for ourselves.

Questions like these. Have we engaged in silence and listening even enduring criticism before we have responded with our own opinions? Have we been willing to suffer for others before we have stood up to oppose them? Have we looked for opportunities to be servants to our enemies in the posture of weakness rather than simply finding stronger means to overcome them? Those are not political questions or activist questions or conservative questions or liberal questions, they are cross questions.

Now I know, that sounds remarkably naïve which, quite frankly, I have been called that before. I prefer though to say I'm foolish. Foolish enough to believe that the savior of the world chose not to save his own self, but others. Foolish enough to believe that the greatest victory we've even known looked like the greatest defeat we've ever seen. Foolish enough to believe that the man who had every claim to every right and every freedom in the world, simply decided to endure and suffer for others. Foolish enough to believe that the way to counter our enemies is not in gaining power over them, but in serving them with all we have.

I, for one, am a long way from becoming that Mark 15 follower of Christ. But my hope and prayer is that together we will challenge one another to keep pushing through the gospel all the way until the end, so that we might stand next to that centurion, in the shadow of the cross and be able to say, "Truly this is God's Son." May it be so. Amen.