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Mark 8:31-38

A Journey to Resurrection: Expectations

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Mark 8:31-38 NRSV

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But 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.” 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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.”

Monday and Tuesday of this week we stayed in our pajamas all day and got so bored being at home that we started playing games. Old games like Uno and Monopoly and we talked about how if it was warm and sunny outside we could play Red Rover or Red Light, Green Light, or Follow the Leader. Do you remember Follow the Leader? I can remember playing the game for hours. I think children are fascinated by Follow the Leader because they always have to be the followers. They have parents and teachers telling them what to do. As adults, we, too, want to be in charge, in control, to give the orders. Peter in our scripture is trying to figure out how to play Follow the Leader when really he might prefer to be the one in charge. Also, and this is very important, if Peter is going to follow Jesus, he has to figure out what kind of leader Jesus is.

When Jesus talks about taking up our cross and following him, I don’t think that we quite get it. The disciples definitely did not get it. The disciples had big hopes for Jesus. Jesus was going to help the Israelite people to gain freedom from the Romans. Jesus was magnetic, he was always performing miracles and huge crowds were drawn to him. The disciples knew that Jesus was going to do something impressive and all of the Hebrew people would be lifted up.

The disciples expected certain things of Jesus and Peter was going to set Jesus straight. Jesus, you have great power and you are the one that will save us all from the Romans. You will restore the kingdom of Israel to its previous glory. Jesus not only sets Peter in his place, but lets all of the disciples know that the way of the cross may well be their future as well. If you are going to follow Jesus, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow.

I really feel bad for the disciples. They expected Jesus to say and do certain things and he did not do what they wanted or what they expected. Often, what we expect to happen does not happen. When I went to high school my mom told me to watch out because people would try to sell me drugs. She told me that I was supposed to turn and run the other way. I was so ready, but no one ever tried to sell me drugs. My expectations did not come true. I remember when we met with the pastor for our premarital counseling and I thought that this marriage stuff would be so easy. It is not easy. Or parenting, seriously, why do I have to take a class to be able to drive a car, but there is no requirement to becoming a parent? And I realized quickly that what I expected to happen did not happen. Often, life does not turn out like we expect.

It seems like it is in our human nature to want to be successful, strong, influential, prosperous. In high school, we all envy the football players and the cheerleaders. We all want to wear the latest, trendiest fashions, no matter what they cost. As we mature and as we become stronger in our faith, we learn that Jesus has other priorities for us—although even as adults we sometimes find following Jesus hard to do.

John Wesley said to gain (earn) all you can, save all you can, and give (away) all you can. We are all good with the first two, yes, we will make as much money as we can, yes, we will save as much money as we can. Now, what? I am supposed to give away as much money as I can? We are called to do the very best we can with our talents and abilities that God has given us. Jesus came to serve, not to be served. And he invites us to follow him and follow his ways. We love following Jesus when it is easy. We love following Jesus when we only have to do church once a week for an hour. But to follow Jesus is to live a life of service to others, to serve rather than to control.

If I am following Jesus and the great commandment to love God and love my neighbor, I am going to have to take up the cross and deny myself. Loving God means putting God first in my life. Loving my neighbor means getting out of my comfort zone, it means advocating for the hungry and the homeless. Denying myself, taking up the cross, and following God’s lead - being willing to give up everything.

I would venture to say that most of us, if we are honest, would side with Peter on this one. We want to lead; we don’t want to follow. Denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus, that is hard. But this is Lent, and this is a time for us to think about self-denial and what it means to follow Christ. We have all of these expectations for how we think life as a Christian should be. And our expectations can be an obstacle to resurrection.

We have expectations about church, about the world, about our parents, about our children, about our spouse, about our work. And Jesus’ disciples had expectations about him. He was going to be a King and win! And Jesus was a King, but not the kind of King that they meant, and he didn’t win in the way that people thought he would. This Christian journey is not about our expectations or society’s expectations or about the world’s expectations.

God stands up against injustice, oppression, exploitation, and violence. We are called to stand with God. In the Message translation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson he translates Jesus’ words to Peter, “Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.” Jesus calls the crowd to join his disciples and says, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?”

 The way to fulfillment is not by gaining security for ourselves, but by gaining security for our neighbors[[1]](#footnote-1). We have to stop thinking about what will make us happy and start thinking about how we can give ourselves to other people. Following Jesus means loving God and this should be the center of our lives. Can we stop focusing on ourselves and measuring our success by worldly definitions? Because Jesus is warning us that we might lose our soul while we are striving to become winners in the ways of the world.

 So, are we “all in?” Are we 100 percent committed to using our gifts, skills, talents, and resources to share the love of God? Jesus has this upside-down vision of the world and that means loving and serving imperfect, sinful, redeemed people alongside fellow followers of Jesus who are imperfect, sinful, and redeemed people. This is life changing. It is an all-in commitment.

 The night that Lee and I celebrated our 6th anniversary of dating, I got upset with Lee. I felt like all of our friends and family expected us to get married. I expected us to get married, and up to that point nothing was happening on the marriage front. So, the next day we went shopping for rings and I freaked out. I wasn’t ready, what if we got a divorce, how could we make sure that we were ready to get married? And it took me about two months to wrap my mind around my fear. I had to accept the fact that I didn’t know if we would be married forever, and I was going to have to jump in with both feet. That’s what marriage is. It’s a total commitment to your partner and to your marriage. And in some ways, marriage is similar to following Jesus. As Christians, we make a total commitment to following our leader – Jesus the Christ.

Jesus calls the crowd to join his disciples and says, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self.” I am ready to follow, and I am ready for Jesus to show me how. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. http://www.gbod.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/second-sunday-in-lent5#preaching [↑](#footnote-ref-1)