

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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The passage we just read is from Mark chapter 8. This is the last time we're going to hear from Mark until Holy Week, so I think we should take stock of where we are and where we've been in this gospel, so that we can locate ourselves in our story today.

So far, since the beginning of the gospel according to Mark, Jesus has:

- Been baptized by John in the Jordan River
- Spent forty days in the wilderness of Judea
- Called four fishermen to be his first disciples – those were Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and his brother John
- Called the first deacon of the church, the mother who ran the house-church in Capernaum
- Healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out demons
- Called eight more disciples: Matthew the tax collector and his brother James, Phillip and best friend Bartholomew, Thomas the question asker, Simon the Zealot, Judas Thaddeus, and Judas Iscariot
- Calmed a storm, walked on water, fed the five thousand, fed the four thousand, and had multiple light spars with the pharisees, concerning things like whether you should heal on the sabbath, or how religious tradition is not necessarily the same as the will of God.

And then, one sentence before our passage today, Jesus asks the twelve disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

And Simon Peter, who was there since the beginning, says to Jesus, “I know who you are. You are the Messiah, the son of God. You are who we have been waiting for.”

They had been waiting many, many years, for a king. They have been waiting generations for the son of man to come in power, and in power Jesus came. His itinerary through Galilee and Judea has been miracle after miracle. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of healings – classic, beautiful healings, stories of God’s glory and power, like the paralyzed man who was lowered through a roof, like the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, like that little girl, the daughter of Jairus, who was raised from the dead. And for Simon Peter, witnessing those things, being there firsthand, helping out, being known to everyone as *part of this thing*, this justice work, this reign of God on earth – it was awesome.

The son of man came in power. A little weird that he was from Nazareth, that nothing-place of a town, but basically everything was going according to plan. Going according to all of the dreams that the people of God had – that Simon Peter had – for their messiah. Here Jesus was, traveling all across the holy land, doing God’s amazing miracles, generating crowds so huge they had to walk on water to get away from them. Like magic! Everything was going great.

And that brings us to right now. This moment: where Jesus and the disciples are walking on the road to Caesarea Phillippi, a gentile city in Syro-Phoenicia, which we call Lebanon. There was a crowd following them, but at a polite, respectable distance, far enough away that they could still speak privately.

Immediately after this beautiful conversation, immediately after Simon Peter said, “I know who you are. You are the Messiah!” Jesus began to tell them something... disturbing. He told them that he, the son of Man, would suffer. Not just “could” suffer, but was *going* to. Jesus said that he would be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. That he would be killed, and three days later rise again.

If you close your eyes, and imagine it, you can almost see the smile slip from Simon Peter’s face.

If his words were true – and Jesus had never given him any reason to doubt him – this was a nightmare.

No, no! Jesus is the messiah! Jesus is supposed to be a king! And we know what kings do: they rule armies. They have victories. They come in a thunder of warhorses and the clashing of blades and their victories are marked in blood. God was supposed to come in a hail of fire and bullets and poison – something, anything, to destroy every Roman and bring back Israel.

Simon Peter must have felt sick. Maybe he was scared. Maybe he was angry. Maybe that's why he pulled Jesus to the side of the road to rebuke him.

To be clear here, the premise of Jesus's resurrection wasn't something he needed to be bought into – I mean, Simon's seen resurrections firsthand, he's seen storms disappear with the snap of a finger, he's seen thousands fed with a few loaves and a few fish. He knows what God is capable of. God is capable of power, and majesty, and glory.

But dying... on a cross, no less, the fate of a common thief?

That is not how this was supposed to go. That is not what we planned. That is not what we were praying for.

Jesus turned to face Simon Peter and all the disciples with him, and he said, "We're going back on the road now, get behind me." The English translation uses the word 'Satan.' It makes it seem like Jesus is calling Simon the devil, but he's really using an old-fashioned term for holy adversary – someone who stands in the way of God doing God's work.

And then Jesus turns to the crowd and says something else – something that, initially, might seem like it doesn't fit the situation. He says that there will be some people in the world who are ashamed of him, ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Not ashamed of the glory... not ashamed of the miracles, the healings, the calming of the seas. Ashamed of the dying. The scandalous shame of the cross.

That God could die. That God would die.

In First Corinthians, Paul wrote something about this moment. He said the story of Christ crucified is stumbling block to the Jews and complete lunacy to the gentiles. Because everyone was waiting for a king, a king who would come in and be victorious and through that victory he would subjugate people and hurt people and spread around riches and glory and splendor, *amen*.

But that is not our God. And Jesus is not that kind of king.

One of my seminary professors wrote that, “the death of Jesus took place in a space where God was thought to be absent.” And not just absent, “it was a place in which God’s revelation would not occur, a place that could not witness to divine glory.”<sup>1</sup>

This ... is the real miracle.

The truth is that the work of God does not often feel like glory. And life in this world is almost never easy, even for the people of God. The truth is that the work of God is often messy and loud and unexpected, and our fellowship table is full of sinners and boat-rockers and table- flippers and

God likes it that way.

The confusing, paradoxical truth, is this: if we want true life – a fulfilling life, an abundant life – the only way to find it is by setting aside our expectations for all that God could be, and joining in the miraculous work that God is already doing in our midst.

We know that Simon Peter's expectations of God were so far from the truth of God. But I wonder – what expectations do we hold of God? Is it possible that our God is greater than even those? And if so, are we willing to deny our expectations, take up our cross and follow God?