

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16
Mark 8: 31-18
March 1, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The purpose of the Gospels is to proclaim Jesus Christ as the messiah who died on the cross and rose victorious from the tomb. The gospels do not present biography. They exist to persuade generations who were not living at the time of Jesus' ministry that he was and is the living Lord, the son of God, the redeemer of the world. The writers of the gospels are counting on the power of the Holy Spirit to speak through the scriptures to the hearts of future generations so that they will, in the words of John, "come to believe that Jesus is the Christ and that through believing they will have life in his name." Jn. 20. This fact is essential to understanding the episode described by Mark this morning.

Mark places two apparently contradictory episodes side by side. First, Jesus confronts the disciples with a direct question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter replies, perhaps for all of the disciples, "You are the messiah." This is no mere lucky guess. It is a confession of faith. It is a profound moment. But in Mark, Peter and the disciples receive no commendation for this confession. Jesus tells them to keep quiet about it.

Immediately following this encounter, Mark reports Jesus teaching about his impending suffering, death and resurrection. Peter's response is to rebuke Jesus. We can guess that, once again, Peter speaks for the group. Mark does not record just what Peter said. The word "rebuke" however in Greek is a very strong word. At root the word indicates to put a weight on. In other words we might say that Peter came down on Jesus "like a ton of bricks."

What might account for the disciples' strong reaction to Jesus' speaking about his impending death? Many years ago psychologists coined the term "cognitive dissonance" to explain powerful, even violent reactions which might apply to this situation. A cognitive dissonance arises when two possible things are combined and become an *impossible* thing. The classic example was a fur-lined tea cup. Tea cup? No problem. Fur? No problem. Fur-lined tea cup? Impossible! Not only impossible but offensive and upsetting. And yet there it is on display at an art gallery near you.

I propose that, placed so closely together, the acknowledgment of Jesus as messiah and his announcement of his suffering and death confronted the disciples' with precisely this psychological and spiritual crisis. Jesus is the messiah. Death is real. But the death of the messiah? Such a concept offends every expectation that the Jewish people had of the messiah. If Jesus is the messiah he will not die. If Jesus dies, he cannot be the messiah. It is impossible that both can be true. Peter's rebuke on behalf of the disciples represents a massive protest against this contradiction. He has already confessed that Jesus is the messiah. Therefore, in his either/or way of thinking, Jesus must be deluded or depressed. Peter seeks to resolve the contradiction in favor of Jesus being the messiah who does not die. And so he rebukes Jesus and demands a retraction.

Yet Jesus has not spoken rashly or out of a state of despair. He has spoken from the deepest dimension of his soul. His heavenly father has appointed this path for him. It is a lonely path. It is the lonesome valley that Jesus must walk by himself. He trusts in God's promise that he will rise from the dead; but at this moment he is weighed down by the reality that he must die. In this respect he is one with the disciples. He dreads death. Perhaps it is not death that

weighs him down as much as the dying—the rejection the humiliation, the torture and abandonment. Yet I believe there is more to this. Jesus *loves* this world. He loves people. He especially loves his disciples—both men and women. Jesus is not a martyr. He is not a masochist. He wants to remain with his sisters and brothers. But Jesus has a higher calling which rises superior to all human connections.

It is no surprise that when Peter lands on him like a ton of bricks, Jesus reacts with equal force. “Get behind me Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He goes on to teach the disciples about the cost of following him. He tells them that being a disciple of Jesus is to follow the same road toward death. To follow Jesus is to be grasped by the same high calling that places faithfulness to God above all human considerations.

There is no doubt in my mind that when Jesus rebukes Peter he is also speaking to himself. Having been in the wilderness and experiencing the temptations to renounce God’s high calling on his life, Jesus hears in Peter the voice of the tempter once again. Yet somehow he finds the inner courage and trust to resist the seductive voice of self-preservation. In this decisive moment Jesus chooses to be the messiah who dies. It will be up to his heavenly father to validate Jesus’ faith.

Friends, it is here that we understand the critical role of the gospels as proclamation. We know by faith what the disciples did not. We know that the messiah can and did die *and* that God raised that same messiah from the dead. We hear the proclamation that in his life, death and resurrection Jesus did not so much conquer death as transcend death. To follow Jesus and to believe in him is to realize that to be truly alive is to abide in the midst death

without fear. It is to choose the life dimension no matter how painful and discouraging life is.

When we walk in faith in the midst of death we give living testimony to the power of

resurrection. We live our lives in light of resurrection. We become living gospels. Amen.