

FOUR GLIMPSES INTO THE LIFE OF JESUS

2. "Purpose: What Was Jesus Up To?"

Mark 8:31-38

Second Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2015

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Last week I began a Lenten preaching series on "Glimpses into the Life of Jesus." I suggested that Lent is a time to slow down and to do something spiritually for yourself. Maybe join a small group or a dinner for eight group which still could be forming, begin a practice of daily prayers and Bible readings, etc. Lent is a time to take a closer look at our faith.

It can also be a time to take a closer look at Jesus. Who is Jesus and what does he mean for you? Most of the gospel writers tell us that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness after his baptism where he fasted and prayed. At the end of the forty days he was tempted by Satan. Frederick Buechner suggests that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness asking himself the question, "What it meant to be Jesus?", and during Lent Christians are asking in one way or another "What does it mean to be Christian."

Those are good questions and we have some head knowledge as to what the answers might be but have we ever internalized those answers? Have we ever tried to experience Jesus beyond our head knowledge to see what it might really be like to know Jesus by experiencing him?

Last week we looked at the story of Jesus' baptism and asked the question, "How was Jesus' baptism like your baptism?" What were the similarities? What did the place look like, who was there, who said the words? Baptism is an experience you share with Jesus.

Today's text takes us to a story of Jesus and the disciples. Mark's Gospel races through the first eight chapters through healing and feeding stories about Jesus. Now, in the middle of chapter 8 Jesus has taken the disciples up to Caesarea Philippi for a retreat. He wants to get them away from the crowds and have a time alone with them. On the way he asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" After some shuffling of feet Peter speaks up and makes his great confession of faith, "You are the Messiah!" Way to go Peter.

That was just the opening Jesus was hoping for. He immediately begins to tell them what is going to happen next and what his purpose is.

"Then," it says, "then, he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the religious leaders, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Wow! That is a lot of teaching isn't it? In just one short sentence Jesus tells them his whole purpose, his whole identity, his whole reason for being.

Peter called Jesus the Messiah. That carried a lot of meaning in first century Palestine. It meant a leader like King David, someone who would liberate the people from their Roman oppressors, someone who would bring freedom and great glory days back to Israel.

Have you ever had anyone do that to you? Have you ever had someone you worked with sit down with you and say, “This is who I am and this is my whole purpose for my life? I sat in a room one day with about thirty-five other people, a session and a staff, back in the 1970’s in Pittsburgh and listened to Frank Harrington . . . yes the Frank Harrington from Peachtree PC in Atlanta who had just become their Head of Staff tell our session on a retreat where Frank was the main speaker, his vision for that church. At the time they had about 2,000 members and Frank said, “In ten years Peachtree will be the largest PC in America. In four years all of the elders will be tithing and in ten years we will have to triple the size of the sanctuary and buy more real estate for the church campus. We all listened and smiled and most thought, “that will never happen.” But it did.

Jesus received a skeptical reaction from his disciples. I would imagine that all of them were stunned. Suffer. Rejected. Killed. None of them had signed up for that. Peter, the unofficial spokesperson for the group and the one who had just declared that he thought Jesus was the Messiah took Jesus by the hand and walked him a few feet away from the crowd and said, “No, NO, NO! This will not happen and I don’t want to hear you talking like this again?” He was rebuking Jesus.

Jesus turns to the other disciples and said, “Do you hear what your leader here is saying?” And then he calls Peter, Satan, and says that Peter is thinking not of divine things but of human things.

I wonder what the other disciples were thinking. “Peter has it right man, what are you talking about?” To, “Well, Jesus I have just heard from my wife and she says I need to come home immediately.”

Now you and I have the advantage of knowing how the story turns out. We can look back over 2000 years of church history and say, “Yes, but they only had to wait around a few months for everything to be alright.” Ever try waiting a few months when your whole life seems to be falling apart. Tell that to the people who went through the “Depression of 2008.” When three fourths of their assets disappeared in two days and they were wondering when the free fall was going to stop. Tell that to anyone who has received bad news from medical lab reports or a bad job review. “We have some tests to run and we’ll know where we are in a few months” or, “Helen, you haven’t been doing well but the company is introducing a new product and you will be the lead person if things go well you will still have a job in six months.”

We know how the story turns out and so we can skip over Peter’s revulsion about suffering and rejection and on to the glory of the resurrection, the heavenly ascension, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the life of discipleship that rarely entails the loss of life. As Joe Small writes in Feasting on the Word, “Even in Lent we may choose to look backwards to the compassionate and welcoming Jesus and look forward to the triumphant Christ of Easter without pausing to think about the agonizing pain and dreadful death that is the focus of the Gospels . . . and of the gospel. Thus like Peter we fail to respond fully to Jesus’ question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’” (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2, pg. 70)

Fred Craddick tells the story, “I remember one night sitting in our small rural church on a Sunday evening. It was a summer revival meeting and so it was hot and the window was open beside my pew. The minister was preaching on his favorite text, ‘If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.’

“I was listening to him drone away when a man came by the church building and came by my window and said, ‘Psst, Psst. ‘I said, ‘Who is it, I am listening to the sermon.’

“He said, ‘Come with me.’ I said, ‘Where are you going?’ He said, I know where there is a pearl that is worth more than all the other pearls in the whole world.’

“I said, ‘There is no such thing.’ He said, ‘I know a place where a treasure is buried in a field and that field is for sale right now.’ I said, ‘You’re kidding!’

“He said, ‘Where I am going the poor widow is allowed to eat right from the king’s table.’ I said, ‘That’s ridiculous.’ He said, ‘In fact they have some pretty big parties for prodigals who come home.’ I said, ‘That’s stupid.’

“Well, I listened to the rest of the sermon and after the service I told the preacher how I was disturbed by someone whispering in the window back where I was sitting and I hoped it didn’t bother him while he was preaching.

“He said, ‘Who was that.’ I said, ‘I don’t know, telling me all kinds of funny stuff. How one has to lose their life before they will gain life.’ He said, ‘Well, was he getting anyone?’ I said, ‘Not any of our crowd but I noticed he had about twelve following him.’” (Craddick Stories, pg. 36)

So, who do you say that Jesus is? Is Jesus real for you? Our knowledge of Jesus is still pretty much in tact in our brain isn’t it. But, is Jesus for real? Do I experience Jesus in my life in my day to day activities? Does it matter when I go into a business meeting that Jesus is going there with me, does it matter when I play in a sporting event that Jesus goes there with me? Or, does it seem like Jesus is anywhere in my life except at church?

Back to Mark, Jesus tries to get real with his disciples. He says, “If anyone wants to be one of my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” He is not talking about the gold cross that is usually on the communion table or the silver cross hanging around your neck. Jesus is talking about the cross of suffering. He is talking about the cross that was real in the life of anyone who opposed the government’s way of doing things. Individuals who had a fresh idea or take on things were hung up on a cross, like a billboard advertisement saying, “Don’t be like this one.”

But Jesus says this is how we do it, we deny ourselves, we give up ourselves in order to find life with the God Jesus speaks of. A giving up of self is demanded. “You must give up yourself in order to gain your self. Whoever loses his or her life for my sake ... will save it.” At the surface level of language it makes no sense. At the deepest level of meaning, we know just what it means. At the human level of language, we know that a marriage or the relationship between a parent and a child will not survive unless the self is given up. I sometimes tell couples at their wedding service that the Bible says the two shall be made one; but which one will they become?

Each has their own ideas and thinks at the moment “they are the one.” It is only when we realize that it is a whole new “one” a merging of the two that is being talked about.

It is hard to find the time isn't it? There are a variety of ways to give of ourselves to deny the self but finding the time is the crunch. That was the dilemma of the disciples too. We are pushed and pulled this direction and then that direction. Jesus is saying there are lots of ways to lose your life but there is only one way to find your life and save it at the same time.

Susan Sarandon in the movie "Dead Man Walking" plays a nun who is the spiritual advisor, appointed by the prison, for a man who is soon to be executed. She is trying to be the image of Jesus for a convicted murderer. The nun tells the man, "I will be there in the room with you when they place you on the table and hook up the tubes. “Just look at me. Look at my face. I want the last thing you see in this life to be the face of love.”

Trying to understand Jesus beyond his words, beyond the saying, to experience Jesus is a lifelong experience. It affirms who we are, warm and wonderful children of God.

Let me suggest that for part of your Lenten journey you go home and write down the times in your life when you tried to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus. What did that feel like? What were the barriers in the way? Did you feel rejected by friends or business associates? Did you suffer? See how many things you have in common with Jesus. Let us experience Jesus anew in our lives—not just knowledge of Jesus—but how you experience Jesus in your daily life.