

Mark 8:31-38 Bill Uetricht 2 Lent 2.22.24

This week we travel with Jesus to Caesarea-Philippi. Paula, Bev several other members of our congregation, and I have been to what are the remains of Caesarea-Philippi. You are seeing some of the remains on the screen. It's a fascinating place to visit. The remains reveal many temples for a variety of gods. In some ways, Caesarea-Philippi is almost like an outdoor shopping mall for small temples. There at this mall you could present an offering to a plethora of gods at a plethora of temples. At the time of Jesus, one of the most famous temples was one built by Herod the Great to honor his dad, Caesar Augustus. Those emperors had no self-esteem problems, or at least it appeared that way. They were thought to be, and thought of themselves as, divine.

Isn't it interesting that this mall of gods, including the god who is the emperor, is where Jesus has quite a conversation about who *he* is and what *his* disciples are to be about?

Who do people say that I am Jesus asks his disciples? In light of all these temples, in light of Caesar, that guy who takes himself so doggone seriously, who do people say that I am? Oh, some say Elijah. Some say John the Baptist back from the dead. But who do you Peter say that I am? Peter responds, "You are the Christ; you are the Messiah."

It's hard to know if Jesus really likes Peter's response. He certainly doesn't say, "Congratulations, Peter, you got it." In fact, he starts a teaching session, as if to help Peter grasp what Jesus' ministry really is all about. Mark tells us, "Then he began to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering."

Mark's words are interesting. "He *began* to teach." This isn't going to be a one-time lesson. The disciples, we, aren't going to catch onto this easily. In Mark, this is the first of three teachings

about the upcoming suffering of Jesus. Sometimes it takes a long time before we understand the bigger stuff.

It's interesting to note that in Jesus' response to Peter, he does not call himself "the Christ." He labels himself "The Son of Man," a figure who shows up in the book of Daniel preparing the way for the end. Literally, the words "Son of Man" mean a child of the human race. Jesus doesn't call himself the Christ. Let's face it. That term probably had all kinds of huge political expectations associated with it. The Christ was going to make Israel great again. The Christ would use power to defeat the enemies of Israel, establishing it as a country of renown, military might, and economic prosperity.

But this is not how Jesus understands his life. And he must make that clear: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." And we are told, he said this quite openly. He's been telling folks to keep his identity a secret, to not report what he is doing. Now, he is going public. And he is going public about his upcoming suffering and pain.

Oh no, Peter says. This can't happen to you. That's not what we signed up for. And I get Peter. I would have said the same thing. Life is supposed to be about victory, not what appears to be failure. Life is supposed to be about life, not death, not suffering.

But Jesus thinks otherwise. He calls Peter "Satan" for thinking as he does. He says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are focusing not on the ways of God, but rather, on the ways of human beings. Get out of my way. I am heading to the cross."

On the one hand, it seems to me that Jesus is overreacting here. He is so focused on his mission that he can't grasp that others are not ready for the message of pain. You know how it works. You become so focused that you don't want anybody to get in the way of

your focus. You know where you are going, and nobody is going to stop you.

I suspect that is true for Jesus, but I also think that Jesus truly has a different view of life than the one that most of us operate with, the one that runs our culture, the one that runs most nations and cultures. And that different view is seen in his words not only to his disciples, but to the crowds: “Any who want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them. What good would it be for you if you gained everything you could buy and yet lose who you really are? What would it profit you to gain the whole world and yet not have a *you*?”

You know, sometimes I think about all these famous people, the entertainers, the sports stars, the politicians, the Putins, the Caesars of the world. They seek fame. They seek fortune. They seek power. And often they get one or all these things. But so frequently they lose themselves. They die early. They live lives estranged from others. Some of you are old enough to remember Howard Hughes, the famous business magnate, one of the richest and most influential people of his time. He had it all, but truthfully, he had nothing. He died a recluse. He had almost no one around him.

The Caesars of the world are often tragic human beings. They get their fancy houses all over the country, their pools, their art, their jewels, and sometimes what they most want, their fame and power, and then they live such disconnected lives, lives that are simply about them. History is replete with stories of one narcissistic Caesar after another. The dictators of the world have been and almost always are narcissists.

Jesus says that if you want real life, you have to get over yourself. If you want a God-shaped life, a life that follows Jesus, you

must lay down your life. And these are words spoken not simply to followers, but to leaders. Jesus, as he is shaping his disciples, is shaping leaders. If you don't want to be like Caesar, if you want to lead in a healthy way, in a way that brings true life, you have to let go of yourself. If you don't, your leadership will simply be about you, not the message you have to proclaim, not the mission that is yours.

I have probably not been overly popular with intern pastors when I have told them that if they want to lead in the church, they are sometimes going to have to set up chairs, do dishes. Or as Jesus would put it, they are going to have to wash feet. They are not too good, too well-educated for that kind of stuff. If you are going to lead, you have to swallow your pride sometimes. Or probably more accurately, if you are going to lead in a Jesus kind of way, you are going to have to not think of yourself as different from everybody else.

In a couple of weeks from now, you are going to hear a marvelous David Crowder song in which the vocalists will sing, "Lay down your burdens." Sometimes the biggest burden we have in our lives is ourselves, which is why Peter has such a hard time going with Jesus where he is going. It's why most of us have a hard time following Jesus. It's hard to get over ourselves. And almost every ounce of our being and every message that the culture gives us is about protecting ourselves, saving ourselves, defending ourselves. It's almost as if we are wired to not lay down ourselves.

So, what enables us to let go? What enables us to lay down our lives? That is what the first and second readings for today are addressing. They focus on a guy named Abraham and a woman named Sarah. God, we are told, makes a promise to these folks, even when they were old and about to die. God tells them: "I will make you exceedingly numerous. You shall be ancestors of a

multitude of nations. I am going to do the impossible. That's my promise to you."

Paul says that Abraham trusted this promise. He left his homeland, living in light of the promise. And God, according to Paul, reckoned this trust as righteousness. Abraham lived out what God wanted most—faith, trust!

How do you let go of yourself? How is it possible to lay your life down. Realize that you live in light of a promise, the promise of a secure self. When you were baptized, you were baptized into worth, love, purpose, meaning. You became a child of the promise. Your life is lived in light of that giant promise. Now admittedly, it is a promise; it is not a guarantee. There are all kinds of forces that will try to take that promise away from you, including ones that come from within you, as well as outside of you. But trust the promise. Live by faith.

So then, "lay down your burdens." Lay down yourself. It isn't about you. It doesn't need to be about you. You are a child of the promise. Take up your cross and follow Jesus. Those who lose their lives will truly find them.