

Who Do We Choose to Be?

Mark 8:31-37

It is not only the season of ‘shelter-in-place’ and not only the year of the coronavirus; this is the season of Lent. Even in these strange and out-of-rhythm days, I hope that for this hour at least, and maybe for the rest of this day, you can let yourself fall into the cadence of the Church’s traditions. Let it be a comfort to you to remember that there is an alternative order to our lives, a pattern that was set long before the crisis we are living through now, and that will not be shaken, even now.

We are still on our way to Easter. And in case you have worried about this a little bit already, let me assure you that we will definitely celebrate Easter. If we are still, in mid-April, living in this cautious state, then maybe we’ll celebrate the resurrection twice—once online on April 12th and again when we all get to come back to church.

That passage from Mark’s Gospel is one of those stories of Jesus that doesn’t really sound like good news. It’s one of those Bible passages that is familiar enough that it tends to sort of run like freeway noise over our ears, without actually penetrating, getting anywhere inside of us. “Take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus says. We’ve heard those words before. “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

Those are heavy words; if we do take them in, they shock us, and they ought to. They make me want to say, to Jesus, “Wait a second. You *want* me to pick up and carry the thing that killed you? I’m supposed to let it kill me too? *Give up my life so that I can have my life?* Is that really what you meant to say? Because that really doesn’t make much sense.”

Those words are completely obscure to our modern, searching-for-comfort ears. This is the kind of Bible passage we know somebody found helpful or comforting at some point...and yet those words are so far outside our sense of what makes a good life, or what is inspiring, that mostly we’re inclined to just let them go. When we hear those words, or read them, they seem so strange and impossible, we just sort of murmur “uh-huh, yeah, got that,” and we move on.

Let’s not do that today. Let’s stop for just a few minutes and try to see if there’s something in those hard and strange words Jesus said, that might actually be helpful in hard times like this one, when it feels like the foundations are shaking under our feet, and maybe life as we know it actually is coming to an end.

Jesus’ words were as strange and unwelcome to the people who heard them then as they sound to us. He started by predicting to his disciples that he would go through a trial for things he had never done wrong. He would suffer, he said, and be killed. It probably sounded overly dramatic to them, far-fetched, pessimistic. He told them that he would rise again too, but they didn’t hear that part, because they got stuck on the part about him predicting his own death. It probably seemed to them unnecessarily downbeat. They were alarmed about this change in his mood. They were used to him being such a hopeful guy.

So Peter took Jesus aside and protested, the Bible says. Peter *scolded* Jesus. Probably they were all feeling uncomfortable, but Peter was the one with the kind of relationship with Jesus that he could give him a good talking-to. I can imagine Peter saying, “Quit talking like that, Jesus. You need to change your attitude. It’s bad for you, and it’s bad for the group.”

But Jesus refused to be talked into a more positive frame of mind. In fact, he said back to Peter, “Get lost, Satan.” (This is the kind of thing you can only say to a really good friend.) And I wonder if what he meant at that moment wasn’t, “Stop trying to make me feel better. You’re missing the point! This is bad. It just is. You can’t make things better just by pretending, or by putting on a happy face.”

Do you know how that feels? When you’re in the middle of a pandemic, or you just got terrible news, and some well-meaning friend or acquaintance says, “It’ll be fine,” when you have no reason to believe that’s true? When somebody says, “You’re a strong person; you’ll get through this,” and you feel like you need every ounce of your energy just to keep from falling in a heap onto the floor? When the conversation moves to that “look on the bright side” place *way* before you’re ready to go there?

I think maybe that’s how this conversation with Peter felt to Jesus. I imagine Jesus felt misunderstood, like no one else saw what he could see ahead of him; no one else felt the same sense of dread he was feeling.

Jesus knew that sometimes things really are pretty bad. Once in a while, the worst case scenario does come true. Jesus knew that he was going to have to suffer. He probably knew *they* were going to have to suffer. But he was Jesus, so he also knew something that the rest of us often forget. He knew that there is no threat that can interrupt God’s promise to be with us. No death that is more permanent than God’s promise of life to us. He knew that the path to life—for all of us—sometimes merges right into the path to death. And that we get where we need to go not by pasting happy faces over hard things, but by remembering that we belong to the God who ultimately makes everything right.

Every day, even now, we are choosing whether to live like people who believe that...or not. Especially in days like this, when things are really scary, and we really don’t know how everything will turn out—that everyone we know will be OK, that our lives will get back to normal soon, that some expert will figure out how to protect us—we choose how we will respond. How we will live next to fear. We can choose to be people who place our faith in a God who is bigger than any virus or stock market crash or even death. A God who has always been that.

Every day, conscious or not, we make choices about who we will be. Even when we think we have no choice, when we say “I’m between a rock and a hard place,” we choose which of those things we will lean against. We can’t always make things turn out the way we want; but we choose—even in unwanted circumstances—to bend our lives, our thoughts, our hearts toward hope and goodness and love. We choose who we will be, even in the middle of circumstances we did not prefer and cannot control.

The power to choose is at the core of our humanity, said Victor Frankl, the Jewish philosopher whose thinking was shaped by his experience in the Nazi concentration camps. “Everything can

be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.” Frankl watched the people who chose love rather than hate even as terrible things happened around them. They could not defeat the hatred of the Nazis. But they could keep hatred from defeating them. What they choose changed them. And that mattered, as much as the physical things going on around them.

I want to tell you about another time that felt like an existential crisis to a group of people who were trying to stay faithful.

Do you remember several years ago when the Vatican tried to clamp down on nuns in the United States for taking more progressive stands than the Catholic Church wanted them to? This was a few years before Pope Francis was elected. In a very careful and systematic way, the Church that those nuns had always been part of, the Church that was home to them, separated itself from them. Church leaders very intentionally set out to erode the credibility and independence of 50,000 American nuns. Those nuns had, for a long time, lived their obedience to God and their calling to do the Church’s work by teaching and nursing and hospitality, caring for the poor, working for justice. And now, the Vatican initiated a very public investigation into the organization and finances of the nuns’ association, called the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Church leaders announced a five-year plan to exercise tight control over all their activities, to bring them more strictly into compliance with Church’s all-male leadership.

The leaders of the Conference of Women Religious were dumbfounded. They hadn’t been rebellious; they hadn’t declared opposition to the Church in any way. This seemed like an intentional act to destroy their order. They had to decide how they were going to respond.

Here’s what they did.

First, they prayed. They simply stayed silent, while they listened for God’s voice.

They decided that they would not use the media as a weapon; instead they would keep asking for respectful, open dialogue, even with people who clearly weren’t interested in what they had to say.

They defined for themselves what this fight was about; instead of naming it a struggle to protect themselves from abuse, they said that the God of the future had called them to this work on behalf of oppressed people everywhere.

They educated themselves; they brought in all kinds of experts who could help them see their situation objectively and in the largest possible context.

They stayed in touch with one another. They made decisions in a broadly democratic way. It slowed them down, but it made sure that everyone in their movement was together, that no one was left behind.

Those nuns lived under the heavy-handed mandate of the Church for three years while they continued to do their work in the world. They stayed in conversation with Church leaders. In 2015, they finally reached an agreement that allowed the nuns to take their place again inside the Church, doing the good work they had always been about. The leaders of the Women Religious were invited into Pope Francis’s chambers for a private, honest conversation—about how hard

this had been, but mostly about what had continued all along: their joy in being called to living as the presence of Jesus in the world. Pope Francis declared 2016 the Year of Women's Contemplative Life. In his announcement to the nuns, he said, "Without you what would the Church be like...? The Church greatly esteems your life of complete self-giving."¹

The mantra that carried those nuns through a very long, very hard time was "We are faithful; therefore we are not afraid." Every time they faced an obstacle, or dealt with meanness, or felt betrayed; every time they had to muster up their courage or move past their tiredness, every time it seemed like this dark night might never end, it was their faith they returned to, and that supported them.

"We are faithful; therefore we are not afraid."

Let that be the path we choose too. No matter what.

¹ Retold from Margaret Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose To Be?*, 2019