

Mark 8:31-38 Turning
Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16
February 25, 2024

Life is a journey. The metaphor of pilgrimage is common in the Christian faith. It is found in the 11th chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews where the saints are presented as being on a, “journey in search of a homeland.” The idea of a journey implies a destination. Life is going somewhere, not just around in circles or out, like a match, the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

Another way of saying the same thing comes from literature; life is a story, playing itself out over time in some kind of order; with a beginning and middle and an end. Life has a plot. There is a setting. There may be subplots.

There are character developments that reveal growth and transformation, and *turning points* that define and give shape to the stories and help us to understand better the meaning of our lives, and the life of the world. They *can* help us to better understand God who is the giver of stories.

The bible tells stories. The gospels tell the story of Jesus, and each year the church, in a general way, tells the story of Jesus through the observing of the liturgical year from Advent to the Time After After Pentecost. Even non-liturgical traditions will celebrate Christmas and Easter which serves as giant hooks on which to hang the whole story.

Right in the middle is Lent, which guides us through the career of Jesus through to Palm Sunday, when Holy Week begins. In terms of the story, the beginning of Lent coincides with the turning point in the career of Jesus.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is with his disciples at Caesaria Philippi at the time, which is in the northern part of Israel, just south of Mt. Hermon and above the Sea of Galilee. It is as far away to the north from Jerusalem as one can get and still be in Israel. From this moment they headed back south toward the Holy City where Jesus would meet his human end, and thus would begin the time of the Church.

Just to catch up, last week the focus of attention was the Covenant with Noah in Genesis, which was the Old Testament reading, and the reference to it that appears in Peter’s first letter, which was the Epistle reading. It was in the gospel reading last week that the central turning point in Mark’s version is described. So let me read that now; beginning in verse 8:27;

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,” or in the lofty words of the King James Version, “Thou Art the Christ.”

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

From that point, the story turns. Jesus begins to try to teach them about his immediate future, about his prospective sufferings, about his death and resurrection. The disciples fail to accept, or understand, or both, even though Mark goes out of the way to emphasize that Jesus spoke plainly about these things.

Peter, the one who is first to call Jesus Messiah, which is a success, follows up his success by rebuking Jesus over these teachings, and finds himself on the receiving end of a severe correction from Jesus, “Get behind me Satan, you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Jesus invites the ever-present crowd to listen in while he makes some life points that are among the easiest to understand, they just sound right when you hear them, and most difficult to achieve;

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

From this point in the journey, on to the finish, things intensify. Three times Jesus predicts his suffering and death and resurrection. He offers *hard* teachings about such things as divorce and wealth, about which he says,

“ . . . It is easier for a camel to go though the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.” And then he adds, “with human beings this is impossible, but not with God, all things are possible for God.”

He answers the request of James and John about seats at his right and left with, “Can you drink the cup I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

He tells them that if they want to be first, they must be servant of all, “for the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Later, he healed a blind man whose name was Bartimaeus on the latter part of the journey to Jerusalem for what would be the final week of his time on earth, and the physical blindness serves as an illustration of the spiritual blindness of the leaders there, with whom he falls into several conflicts.

It all begins with the incident at the Temple. After he curses the fig tree, he overturns the tables of the money-changers and drives out all those who were buying and selling there. He said,

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations . . . but you have made it a den of thieves.”

The Chief Priests; the Teachers of the Law and the Elders; the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians; they all became adversaries, can be thought of almost synonymously as opponents. In the end he was betrayed to the authorities by one of his own disciples. Even Peter, his leading disciple, denies knowing him.

One by one he is abandoned by his closest associates. There is the tortured prayer in the garden, the arrest and the trials, and the cross itself, which he says all those who want to follow him must find, and take up for themselves.

All the conversations become weighted, and the crowds either become thin or *turn* on him. What started out with high hopes ends in disappointment and tragedy.

And we are left to try and understand what it means for us today, that Jesus is the Christ; what it means that Jesus is God’s Son. And all the story turns on the great confession of Peter, which is also our confession.

There is too much to say; but let us end by making a start of it. The gospel is not primarily about certain facets of life, it is not addressing those who find it interesting, or who find meaning in it. The gospel *is* about life.

It means healing and cleansing
It means a healthy mind and spirit
It means deliverance and liberation
It means justice with mercy
It means forgiveness

In view of this grace, it means that our determination to better ourselves and our world are worth the effort, because they prepare us for the end of the journey.

It means *time*, that is, it means that everyday is an exercise in God’s patient forbearance, in order for us to work our way to God, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, because God has come down to us.

It means that in that time each of us, and everyone in the world, is given a chance to respond to God’s love and sacrifice, and to understand the meaning of our lives in terms of the turning of Jesus at Caesaria, and the journey towards Jerusalem which began there, to where the great sacrifice was given; and our own turning towards God, who waits for us patiently there.

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