

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
September 16, 2018
Title: On the Mend: Healing Fear
Scripture: Psalm 19
Mark 8:27-38

The world loves a wedding. This spring the world seemed captivated by the royal wedding of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry. The news was filled with the “must know” wedding secrets and details. But in sharp contrast to this coverage were the stories of “pervasive sexual abuse of women and girls by privileged men, the rise of ozone-destroying emissions,” and the current administration’s practice of separating children from their immigrant parents, who were then deported.ⁱ

For people of faith, as we watched and interacted with all of the widely disparate news, we may have found ourselves asking questions like “Where is God?” “What are the things that God cares about?” That leads us to the bigger question about how we understand who God is and what God does. It’s the question that Jesus asked his disciples in today’s gospel reading, “Who do you say that I am?”

Whenever we face the ups and downs in life, we may find ourselves asking that question in one form or another. Where and how do we expect God to be present? What do we expect God to do?

Peter, who was often impetuous and always quick with an answer, responded, “You are the Messiah.” Today we understand that word, “Messiah” differently than people did in Jesus’ day. The Hebrew word *mashiah* (or in English, messiah) is the same as the Greek word *christos* or “Christ”. Both literally mean “anointed one.” There were many who had been called “messiah.” A messiah was simply someone anointed by God to accomplish a task for God’s people.ⁱⁱ Various political rulers had been

called “messiah” or “son of God” or other terms that claimed that their rule was ordained by God – however, they understood God to be at the time. In some cultures, the ruler himself was considered to be a god.

After the Exile, Jews looked for a messiah who would be their future king. At this point, for Peter or anyone to call Jesus “Messiah” was politically dangerous because it was a claim that Jesus is or would be the true king of Israel. They were not expecting a divine redeemer. They were looking for a king and they think they have found one in Jesus. This proclamation would have been a challenge to Rome.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Mark, Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone about him.

Peter was probably feeling pretty good about himself. He had nailed it on the head, and Jesus’ warning not to tell anyone seemed to confirm that this was an important executive committee secret until the time when everyone would know. But then Jesus pierced Peter’s excited bubble.

Jesus started to talk about how he would undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders and eventually killed. He did also say that after three day he would rise again, but Peter didn’t hear that part. What Peter heard was that the future king, the one who was to save Israel from Rome was going to suffer and be killed. How could this be? And if Jesus were killed, those who followed Jesus might be killed as well. Peter had a wife and likely children. Suddenly Peter was afraid – very afraid.

Either Jesus was confused, or something was very wrong, and Peter needed to set it straight. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Jesus however let Peter know in no uncertain terms that he had it wrong. Peter was thinking about things from a human perspective. He wasn’t thinking about God’s plan.

He didn't know and couldn't understand God's plan – the one that Jesus was trying to explain – the one that meant being a messiah was something different than being a human king. He couldn't yet understand that when Jesus stood up for justice, and challenged the status quo, he was walking directly onto a path that would lead to his suffering and death.

It would also lead to his resurrection but when you are afraid, there are some things that you cannot hear – and Peter could not understand or even hear this part of the message. It's like that for us sometimes isn't it? When we are afraid, we hear only the words that feed the fear. It's hard to hear the words that offer hope, promise, and a future.

Jesus then called the crowd and with his disciples he tried to help them understand. Sometimes it sounds like Jesus speaks in a foreign language. We may know the words, but the meaning is confusing. This was one of those times. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” Now, if that isn't confusing, I don't know what is.

For Peter, and probably the other disciples, who were afraid because of what Jesus had previously told them, this probably sounded like a lot of gobbledygook. It's confusing, not only for them, but for us as well, and this passage has been used by some in ways that quite frankly I think are very different than what Jesus was talking about. I think those interpretations can lead us into some unhealthy understandings and approaches to our faith.

First, when Jesus says that we need to deny ourselves, he is not talking about putting ourselves down. This has sadly led to oppression of one group over another, but that is a corruption of Jesus' intent. When Jesus talks about denying ourselves, he is talking of the self that insists that we are better than others or that we have more rights than others.

Consistently throughout scripture, Jesus reaches out to those who are considered to be the least, somehow less than other people. In relationships like marriage, family, friendships and any other relationship, it means treating each other as people who are loved by God and are just as important to God as we are. It also means remembering that we are truly loved by God; we are not less than, but we are precious to God.

When Jesus talks about taking up our cross, I believe he is talking about willingly making a decision that we know will lead to suffering, or problems. Sadly, throughout the ages, people have sometimes been told that whatever is happening in their lives that they think is bad or difficult is happening because God has decided it should happen. Sadly, those who are poor, or those who are ill, or those who are oppressed or abused may have been told that this is their cross to bear.

I absolutely believe that God is with us in the middle of whatever is happening in our lives. However, I believe that God is with us to help us, to strengthen us, to guide us, to empower us not to put a burden upon us.

Miguel D'Escoto of Nicaragua wrote, "I don't think we Christians have understood what carrying the cross means: the path of baptism. We are not carrying the cross when we are poor or sick, or suffering small every day things. They are all part of life. The cross comes when we try to change things. That is how it came to Jesus."^{iv}

Jesus could have lived a long life, without conflict, if he had been willing to go along with the status quo; if he hadn't challenged the religious authorities, if he hadn't taught something that was different than what the religious authorities promoted; if he had been willing to live with injustice and oppression. But Jesus wasn't willing to do that. That's his point in today's gospel. He knew that the path he was taking would lead to being challenged, to suffering, and to his death. However, he also knew that he would rise again.

This is very different than the unavoidable pain and discomfort that is part of life. This is choosing the path of standing against injustice, oppression, abuse, manipulation, hatred. This is knowing that when we take these stands, there will be people who oppose us, people who may try to stop us. It is knowing that we are doing the right thing, the thing that God is calling us to do in a particular situation.

I believe that in all our relationships, God is calling us to first recognize and know that God loves each one of us. Secondly, in all our relationships, in all of life, we are called to know and act in ways that proclaim that God loves all persons. Thirdly, we are called to live our lives in ways that help others experience life in the fullness that God wants for all of us.

When Peter heard Jesus talk about suffering and dying, he was afraid because he thought the most important thing was an earthly king for Israel, a king that would lead them to victory and freedom. Jesus' words threatened that view and frightened Peter.

It is normal for us to react with fear to some of the things that happen in our lives. Peter did. Other disciples did. There is no shame in that. We are all afraid from time to time. It is hard not to be afraid of the unknown, of

things that can harm us. However, the reality is that when we live in fear, when we allow the fear to control us, then we can become paralyzed by the fear. We have the promise in scripture that God's strength is shown in our weakness.

I was reminded once that courage doesn't mean not being afraid, it means doing what needs to be done, even when we are most afraid. It means remembering that Jesus and the disciples walked a path that must have been frightening, but they did it anyway because there was something much more important at stake. It means turning to God for strength in taking the next step whatever that step may be. It means remembering that we are loved by God and God never leaves us alone to face the future. It means knowing that all persons are loved by God and we are called to treat each person as a beloved child of God. It means being willing to take steps that lead to justice, fairness, and safety for all persons.

ⁱ The thought for this paragraph and some of the words come from Pearl Maria Barros article "Giving Witness" in Sojourners Preaching the Word

ⁱⁱ Keeping Holy Time, Year B

ⁱⁱⁱ Wright, Tom. Mark for Everyone

^{iv} Price, Paul B. "Getting It Straight", in Sojourners Preaching the Word.