

Satan's Stand-In

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Mark 8:27-38

It's confusing. Jesus goes from place to place, teaching and healing, drawing large crowds. Again and again, he tells people he's helped to keep it quiet. Again and again, they can't hold it in. But do they know who Jesus is? Do they know what he has to do?

Jesus set out with his disciples for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" And they told him, "That you're John the Baptist, or that you're Elijah, or that you're one of the prophets." And he asked them, "How about you? Who do you say I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And [Jesus] warned them not to tell anyone about it.

Now he began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer greatly, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, to be put to death, and after three days to rise again. He spoke plainly about this. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter. He said, "Get back behind me, Satan! You're not thinking about what matters to God, but about what matters to people."

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said to them, "If anyone wants to follow along behind me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. Because whoever who wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life because of me and the good news will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world but to have his life repossessed? What price can someone pay in return for his life? Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him, when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Children's Story

When I was ten years old, my mom did not like my best friend. "He's a trouble-maker," she said, "and you're going to get yourself in trouble along with him." She was right.

My best friend was not very well-behaved. He always did things he shouldn't have. Sometimes I helped. I think I told you already about the fire we started in the woods behind his house. My mom was right. My friend was trouble. And I got in trouble along with him.

Kids — and grown-ups, too — get in trouble when they do bad things. But sometimes they get in trouble when they do good things, when they do the right thing.

Protect someone from a bully, and you may get beat up yourself. You may even have to go to the principal's office.

I got in trouble more than once when I was a kid for throwing away my parents' cigarettes. I threw away whole cartons of cigarettes at a time. I thought it was a good thing to do, the right thing to do. Today I still think it was the right thing to do — those cigarettes killed my father! — but I sure got in trouble for doing it.

Do you know that Jesus was a trouble-maker? Some people sure thought so. And they thought the same thing about his disciples, too. I wonder if anyone would think of us as trouble-makers.

Sermon

Get off northbound State Route 315 at the North Broadway exit, turn right onto North Broadway, angle your car into the left turn lane at Olentangy River Road, and wait for the light. If you're first in line, you have two paces where you can wait. You can stop up at the stop line, over one of those magnetic triggers, and wait for the light to turn green and for the oncoming traffic to clear, then make your left turn. Or you can stop farther back, as if you're the third car in line, over a different magnetic trigger, so that you get a left turn arrow and can make your turn without waiting for oncoming traffic. It's probably not the right thing to do.

It's a short-cut. It's faster. But it's also selfish and unfair to others. And most of the time, that's what I do. Because I like my life as untroubled as possible, and I'll take what little advantages I can get.

Last week, I began my sermon with a little self-revelation about my inability to multi-task, then hinted that Jesus and I are sort of alike. The fact is — and the story I just told on myself makes it clear enough — I'm not much like Jesus at all. Jesus was not one for short-cuts.

Jesus' three years in the public eye are book-ended by opportunities for him to take short-cuts, to take an easier way. At the beginning, Jesus was baptized and, just like that, the Holy Spirit drove him out to the wilderness. For forty days Jesus was there, being put to the test by Satan. Mark doesn't describe that testing; Matthew and Luke do. The tests tempted Jesus, tempted him to satisfy his own hunger, tempted him to make a public spectacle of his Father's love for him, tempted him to take his throne and begin to rule, and to do it all now, with as little trouble as possible. Jesus resisted those temptations. He passed his wilderness test.

Luke wraps up his telling of that story this way: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). That opportune time came at the end. In the wilderness, each test had begun the same way. "If you are the Son of God," Satan would say. "If you are the Son of God." Those words came back while Jesus hung dying on the cross. This time it was the crowds and the soldiers saying those words. "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40). "If you are the King of the Jews" — which is what "Son of God" meant — "save yourself" (Luke 23:37). There was the test. There was the temptation. "Take a shortcut, Jesus! Take an easier way! Why suffer like this? Why die? Do it another way! This is no fate for the Messiah! This is a fate for fakers!"

Satan always hit Jesus when he was most vulnerable. Hungry, thirsty, terribly alone in the wilderness. Barely alive. Barely human any more. ("It's not good for a human being to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). No wonder solitary confinement is a tool of torturers!) That's when Satan struck. Or when Jesus was bleeding, thirsty, struggling for breath on the cross. All too human in brokenness, agony, and sense of abandonment. Then Satan attacked, attacked at the most vulnerable place, at the very agony which Jesus had begged his Father to be spared. But Jesus refused the devil's bargains, again and again refused. There would be no short-cut. There would be no easier way. Not at the beginning. Not at the end. Nor in the middle either.

In the middle, the same test came, a temptation to take an easier way. This time the test did not come as before. In the wilderness, the voice Jesus heard testing him was probably his own, the voice of inner torment. From the cross, the voices Jesus heard were mixed. There were the familiar voices of the religious leaders and of a now skeptical crowd. And there were the essentially anonymous voices of the soldiers, uniform in the system they both represented and served. But this time, it was the voice of a friend testing him, a friend who was trying to be loyal, trying to talk some sense into Jesus.

Jesus had tried to clue them in. First, Peter had spoken for them all: "You are the Messiah." In other words, "You are the Son of God. You are the one who restores the line of David. You are the King of Israel!" Hardly had Peter's words faded, when Jesus began to unpack them, to unpack them in an unexpected, unimaginable way. Jesus was planning a suicide mission. He was planning to be a failure as messiah. Jesus was expecting to get nowhere, to be, in no time, a dead king. Messiah's coming would not be without trauma and trouble. But still, devout Jews expected something more, something better than that. They expected a time of light and renewal, a time of dreams fulfilled. Now here Jesus was, talking about darkness and death. It was a nightmare. It was no way to be messiah.

Peter, blessed Peter, rose to the occasion. He took Jesus off to the side and read him the riot act. We don't know just what he said, but Mark classifies it as a rebuke. Peter, in other words, took a strong stand. And without a moment's hesitation, Jesus put Peter back in his place. "Back behind me!" Jesus said. Jesus was leader and Peter follower. Peter's place was behind Jesus, not alongside him, and certainly not in front of him. Jesus' mission was what it was. The path before him was what it was. None of this was open to question. There would be no short-cut, no easier way. And to make clear what was at stake, Jesus identified Peter and whom he was serving. "You're Satan right now," Jesus said. "When you speak this way, I hear his voice, putting me to the test again, tempting me to choose what people want instead of what God wants."

Lead actors in plays and musicals often have stand-ins. They know the lines, the songs, the steps. If the lead actor is unavailable on short notice, the stand-in stands in.¹ Pity the stand-in who has to substitute for an icon of the stage. When the crowd has paid good money to see Nathan Lane in *The Producers*, they don't want to see an understudy instead. But sometimes the stand-in is so so good, so pitch-perfect, that you can't tell the difference. Peter, for this one performance at least, was apparently pitch-perfect. He had Satan down cold. So Jesus looks at his disciples — they need to recognize what's going on — and says to Peter, "Get back behind me, Satan!" Jesus would not be turning back. He would not even be turning aside. All there was for Peter and the others to do was to follow him, to follow him even if they had to pay the same price, even if a cross was in their future.

And apparently that's how it is for those who follow Jesus. Peter and the others would have figured that out soon enough. Being first century Galileans, they knew about crosses. Again and again one religious zealot after another rose up in Galilee, in the name of God, against Rome. Again and again the would-be revolution failed, and the revolutionaries were fitted for crosses. A cross was a political punishment for a political crime, for the crime of standing up against Caesar and his "peaceful, just, benevolent" rule.

Jesus knew that he would be challenging Rome, that he would certainly be bumping up against the claims of Rome and of Caesar, and that the likely outcome of that encounter would be a cross. Jesus also knew that his followers would be in the same position and that they would likely suffer the same fate. Peter and the others would have caught on quickly to what he was saying. That they didn't turn back is commendable. That Peter would deny Jesus and that all the disciples would later hide in a locked room is not surprising. There was a price to pay to be Messiah, to stand up as God's true king, establishing the one universal kingdom in a world full of tyrants and petty potentates all in thrall to the spiritual forces of evil. There was a price to pay. And there would be a price to pay by everyone who acclaimed the Messiah as the world's one true Lord.

A price to pay because followers of the Messiah become stand-ins for the Messiah. Stand-ins, not in the sense of taking Messiah's place or taking his role, but in the sense of playing the part wherever they are, denying themselves for the sake of God's kingdom, for the sake of that kingdom's mission in the world.

Have you ever wondered about self-denial? Is no ice cream during Lent self-denial? How about no ice cream ever again? Or in either case is that amazingly trivial, a mockery of self-denial? How about going without family or friends or home, not because you're a jerk or a poor financial manager, but because of the kingdom and its mission, because it turns out to be the best way to respond to God's call? How about going without any sense of God's presence, not requiring it, not demanding it of God as the price of your faith and commitment? By now you've heard about Mother Teresa's decades-long "dark night of the soul." For years and years and years, all the way to the end apparently, she labored on with no sense of God's presence with her, doing what was required of her, not requiring God to reassure her. That's self-denial, I think, not making demands of God, yet continuing to do what God requires.

Those who follow the Messiah are stand-ins for the Messiah, taking up a cross, as he did, for the sake of God's kingdom, for the sake of that kingdom's mission in the world. Taking up a cross? What's that about? Again, crosses were a political imposition. People who opposed the power structure that was Rome wound up on crosses.

In so many ways, we have reduced Christian faith to the merely peripheral and personal. Not that the peripheral and personal don't matter. They do matter. But they are not the point, not the main point. You don't think, do you, that Jesus died so that you would be nice to your neighbor? Or so that you wouldn't look at Internet porn? Sure, those things matter. But they're not the main point. Here's a clue about that. Will being nice to your neighbor put you on a cross? Will abstaining from Internet porn put you on a cross? Of course not! But get caught hiding your Jewish neighbor from Nazi occupation forces, and you will feel a cross on your shoulder. Stand with Martin Luther King, Jr., to announce a biblical vision of justice and to demand it for all, and you may wind up on a cross. Or a cross may wind up on your front lawn, in flames.

¹ Yes, I know, I'm confusing "stand-in" with "understudy." Bear with me, though. "Stand-in" works better alliteratively with Satan.

I wonder how Jesus wants us to deny ourselves today. And I wonder what crosses we may have to carry. Can we avoid those questions? Aren't they essential questions for people who follow Jesus, or claim to follow Jesus? Aren't they central questions? Self-denial and a cross certainly were central and essential for Jesus! There's no way to avoid these questions, is there? Unless we're looking for an easier way, for a short-cut.

Jesus did not die so that I wouldn't work the traffic light angles at North Broadway and Olentangy River Road. He died so that we would follow him into God's kingdom, follow him on the long, difficult path that has no short-cuts, but plenty of crosses. That's the only way. Unless we want to be Satan's stand-ins. That's a job that's always available, even in tough economic times. But learn from Peter. He didn't keep that job for long at all!