

With friends like these . . .

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

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Matthew 16:21-28

Simon Peter had spoken up, for himself and for the church of all ages. Jesus is the Messiah, he said, the Son of the living God – all that Israel had been waiting for, all that God had promised. Peter spoke boldly, but Jesus told Peter and the others to keep this to themselves – for now. Apparently there was more to being the Messiah, and to following him, than they had realized.

From then on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer severely at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the religious scholars and be killed and on the third day be raised. Then Peter took him aside and began to chastise him. He said, “God forbid it, Lord! This will never happen to you!” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get back behind me, Satan! You’re a stone for me to trip over. You’re not thinking God’s way, but the human way.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you want to come behind me, then deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. Because if you want to save your life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life because of me, you will find it. What good will it do you, if you should gain the whole world, yet lose your life? Or what will you give in exchange for your life? Because the Son of Man will surely come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will repay everyone according to what they have done. I tell you the truth, some of you standing here will not taste death until you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Sermon

I bet Peter was confused. And it’s no wonder. One minute Jesus was praising Peter as the church’s foundational *rock*, as someone solid enough to be entrusted with the keys of the kingdom (cp. Matthew 16:18-19). The next minute Jesus was indicting Peter as the devil incarnate, as someone who was trying to make him do a face-plant.

In each case, Peter had only said a few words. That’s all it took. Just a few words. “You are the messiah, the son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). That’s all it took, and Jesus was praising Peter, crediting him with divinely-inspired insight. Just a few words. “God forbid it, Lord! This will never happen to you!” (Matthew 16:22). That’s all it took, and Jesus was indicting Peter, accusing him of being in league with the devil. Just a few words.

Just a few words. But sometimes just a few words can make all the difference. “Will you marry me?” “It’s a girl!” “You’re fired!” “I’m afraid the tumor is inoperable.” Sometimes that’s all it takes. Just a few words. Just a few words, and you’re walking on air. Just a few words, and you’re crash landing.

But why did those few words from Peter upset Jesus so much? Peter was one of the inner circle. Peter was a friend. Yet Jesus labels him an adversary, not a friend, but an enemy. What was so wrong about Peter's few words?

Here's what was going on. Jesus had been explaining to his disciples what was in store for him: a journey to Jerusalem, followed by a journey through suffering and death. But Peter would have none of it. A journey to Jerusalem? Sure. Where else should the messiah, Israel's king, be found?! But suffering and death? No. "This will never happen to you, Lord!"

It seems that Peter has better hopes for his friend Jesus, that he simply can't imagine Jesus suffering and dying, that the thought of it is too much for him to bear. So he scolds Jesus and tries to drive the thought from Jesus' head.

But Peter's objection was not about his personal feelings or about his imagination. It was about the story that Peter had learned. It was about the story that Peter lived by. According to this story in its standard version, Israel's destiny was to be the first of all nations and Israel's king, the messiah, would rule over the whole world from Jerusalem. In this standard version of the story, there was no suffering and dying for the messiah. There was only triumph for the messiah and, with the messiah, triumph for Israel.

Jesus, however, had been telling his disciples a different version of the story. This version of the story started at the same place as the standard version: started with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the covenant promises; started with Moses, the exodus, and the law; started with David and Solomon and the kingdom; started with the ongoing experience of exile. But when Jesus told the story, the climax was not simple victory for Israel and triumph over all her enemies. No, when Jesus told the story, every narrative thread led to the messiah's death.

Peter's few words, the words that upset Jesus so much, were a complete rejection of the story as Jesus was telling it in favor of the standard version, which again was the version of the story that Peter and the others had grown up with, in which there was only triumph for the messiah.

No wonder Jesus was upset. It was the standard version of the story that the devil had used to test him. In the wilderness, the devil had promised Jesus a shortcut to the final chapter of the story in its standard version. "Bow down to me," the devil had said, "and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" (cf. Matthew 4:8-10). Jesus, of course, had refused to be swayed. And now, when Peter is working from the same script, Jesus again refuses to be swayed. And he indicates what's going on and what's at stake – it's testing all over again – when he names his friend Peter Satan his enemy.

Jesus flatly rejects the standard version of the story when Peter tries to force it on him. "It's not God's way," he warns Peter. "It's a human way – a human way with devilish elements" (cp. Matthew 16:23).

Then Jesus changes the subject – or does he? When Jesus starts talking about his followers having to deny themselves and take up a cross, it's not obvious at first what this has to do with the Peter/Satan episode. The connection has typically been made this way, with

Jesus saying, in effect, “Look, there is going to be a price for me to pay to be the messiah, so if you want to follow me, you’d better be ready to pay a price yourselves.” So what we have is a challenge from Jesus, a challenge to be ready to pay the cost, the cost of discipleship.

But I think this reading misses the connection, which is in v. 26. There Jesus says, “What good will it do you, if you should gain the whole world, yet lose your life?” I’ve usually linked this question to the self-denial of v. 24, and imagined that Jesus is calling his disciples to a life of sacrifice, a life of sacrifice that would leave them bereft of wealth, of comfort, of home, of family. The warning is that, even if you gain everything the world has to offer in terms of material comfort, social standing, deep relationships, and so on, you would still be on the losing end, because that’s not the path to life, to real life. Instead the path to life is the path of self-denial, and that self-denial is the cross that must be borne.

But I don’t think that’s the point. I think what we have here is Jesus’ explicit rejection of the standard version of the story. According to that standard version of the story, Israel would gain the whole world. (Remember, that’s what the devil offered to Jesus!) But Jesus tells his disciples that if they cling to that standard version of the story, to the expectation that they would gain the whole world, they will be disappointed. And he challenges them to live according to the new version of the story, the version that he is telling them, the version that God is writing through him.

It won’t be easy. His version rewrites every story, and peoples don’t like that. Rewrite Israel’s story, and there will be rejection. Rewrite Rome’s story, and there will be crosses. (Don’t be confused here. A cross was not a generalized form of self-denial or sacrifice. It was a very explicit instrument of Roman “justice,” oppression, and torture.)

Am I on the right track here? I think so. Notice the next thing that Jesus mentions. It sounds like the final judgment, and it seems to come from nowhere, until you fit it in with the critique being made by Jesus. Final judgment was expected by all. In the standard version of the story, it would be the next to the last chapter, when scores would be settled with every enemy nation. But Jesus has his own version of the story. As he tells it, the final judgment, whatever form it takes, will be exercised by the Son of Man. In other words, the story that will unfold will be his story.

The last verse in the chapter confirms this reading of the passage. In that verse, Jesus refers to the coming of the kingdom, which, in the standard version of the story, would be the last chapter. But notice whose kingdom it is. It’s the Son of Man’s kingdom. Here again, Jesus is challenging his disciples and everyone who hears him to abandon the standard version of the story and to accept the version of the story that he is telling, the version that God is writing, there in front of them, featuring a messiah who will suffer and die as the way to bring justice and blessing to the whole world – as the story promised from the beginning.

This is all good information, but there’s more to it than that. This episode challenges the stories that we all live by. First of all, it challenged Israel, including Peter and the other disciples, who had bought into the standard version of how Israel would triumph over

all comers. It also challenged the Romans, who thought that history was theirs to create, theirs to unfold, who considered themselves already to be exercising god-like authority over “all the kingdoms of the earth and their splendor.”

And all these years later, there’s a challenge here to the stories we live by. Last week I read the book *The Imperial Cruise*. It’s the story of a 1905 diplomatic mission sent by President Theodore Roosevelt to Hawaii, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and China. It’s a shameful episode within an ugly story built upon an arrogant understanding of human history and destiny.

The leadership class and the majority population of the United States saw a national purpose in bringing the blessings of white, Christian civilization to all the inferior peoples of the world, seeking, as it were, to “gain the whole world,” imagining it to be our manifest destiny, imagining ourselves as Christian soldiers, carrying the good news of white supremacy to all the dark races on earth.

I’m sure that by and large we have rejected the points of view of our forbears a century ago. But there are echoes still today. And people who find themselves under our political, economic, or military domination probably see things differently than we do, and not without reason.

In the first century, Jesus called his disciples to reject the standard version of the story that Israel, the chosen people, lived by, to reject that standard version in favor of a revised version with him at the center and with suffering as an inevitable destiny, suffering at the hands of dominant power. Does Jesus expect any less of us?

We call ourselves Christians. Yet we are immersed in the American story, the story that “this almost chosen people” lives by. But does Jesus expect us to live by a different story, to live by the story he tells? The answer, I think, is obvious.