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“The Making of the Messiah”

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Mark 8: 31-38

In the Gospel of Mark, the narrative reaches its zenith in the passage prior to the one we read. It is there that Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” After receiving a variety of responses, Jesus then asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter, answering for all the disciples says, “You are the Messiah.”

Up until this moment, Jesus focused his ministry in Galilee, which is the northern area of Palestine. Galilee is a great distance from the political and religious center of the country which is located in Jerusalem. In Galilee, Jesus taught and healed and fed multitudes; he gathered around himself a close-knit community of women and men in whom he confided and for whom he set an example. Jesus battled with the tempter in the wilderness and with demons in the possessed and with opponents among the religious establishment.

Jesus displayed characteristics akin to those of the faithful and mighty in Israel’s history. In his healing and confrontations, he was like Elijah. In his demand for justice and righteousness for the poor, he was like the prophets. In his proclamation of the Kingdom and call for repentance, he was like John the Baptist.

To be compared to any of these is quite significant. Yet the one preeminently awaited by the Jewish people was the Messiah.

The expectations for this Messiah were extraordinarily high. The Messiah would command the law like Moses, defeat the nation's enemies like Samson, and discern the will of God like Samuel. The Messiah would unify the nation like King David, demonstrate wisdom like King Solomon, and re-establish the genuine worship of Yahweh like King Hezekiah. The Messiah would redress injustice like Hosea, set aright the people's hearts like Jeremiah, and usher in the kingdom of peace as foreseen by Isaiah.

When Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" the answer Peter offered was a remarkable affirmation: "You are the Messiah."

Peter appears to have answered the question correctly. Isn't that all he should be expected to do, to get the answer right? Isn't that all any of us should be expected to do? Let's get the answer right, feel good about ourselves, and then move on about our business.

The problem for Peter and for us is that we may get the answer right but have the wrong understanding of the Messiah, of what the Messiah is, of what the Messiah does.

When Peter made the assertion that Jesus was the Messiah, all of the expectations of the Messiah that were current in his day came with that assertion. And that is where our scripture passage picks up.

"Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."

"Wait a minute, Jesus! We've got foreign troops in the land imposing on us their will and their law and their religion. Our own leaders operate an unjust political system that robs the poor and enriches the wealthy. Our priests neglect the needs of the flock and tend to themselves first. Our educational system is a mess and marked with cronyism, and students are the last priority on the agenda. What do

you mean the Messiah is to suffer and die? We need the Messiah to transform this mess! We're looking for solutions and you are it.”

Peter might not know exactly what the Messiah was supposed to be about, but being a reject and dying a sorry death was not in the cards.

Have you ever gotten it completely wrong where you thought things were supposed to be one way, and it wasn't that way at all? Maybe it was about your chosen profession, teaching or law or journalism or medicine; you spent years preparing yourself; you may have been idealistic and thought you could change the world, or at least make a significant difference. Yet what you found were resistance and inertia that wore you down instead of you pushing through to make a difference.

Or maybe you have volunteered in a community organization and then found that the people in the organization are glad to have worker bees but really don't want someone coming in to meddle with the way they operate. Things are fine the way they are, and efficiencies or better ways to serve their constituencies are not priorities.

Political parties and religious groups can disappoint and disillusion us.

Peter might not know exactly what the Messiah was supposed to be about, but what Jesus was saying didn't fit.

In the rebuke Jesus directed to Peter, I want you to notice something in the text. “But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter...” Jesus was not merely speaking to Peter; he was addressing all the disciples because every one of them had a preconceived notion of what God was supposed to be about in sending his Messiah.

When the divine intent is displaced by human plans, even really wonderful human plans, and when disciples become distracted from divine things by human things, Jesus steps in to interrupt our assumptions and thought processes and plans and intentions.

“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. How can they profit if the whole world is gained but they lose their life?”

From the moment of Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus begins reframing for the disciples what it means to be the Messiah as he moves toward Jerusalem. Their expectations will not be fulfilled, for Jesus will take a completely different path. To change a deeply held belief and to unwind a tightly held hope requires Jesus to repeat this teaching on several occasions as they make their way to Jerusalem. Even with the Lord’s presence and his teaching and example, the disciples still don’t understand. They squabble about who is the greatest in the kingdom, and who will sit in the seats of prominence at Jesus’ table in his kingly realm.

Sometimes a change of belief and behavior only takes place through a trauma that shakes us to the foundation. Then as we look back, we see truth in a way that is less self-centered, we understand more fully, and change is possible. The fast-paced events of Holy Week and the crucifixion brought down the disciples’ house of cards, leaving their expectations in a pile of rubble. Only then could their loss be rebuilt into a life-enhancing and redemptive way of being.

You and I have some intimation of this reality. We lose our job, a loved one unexpectedly dies, we have an experience that puts us face-to-face with desperate poverty and human need. We can no longer live life as we had before, merely shopping for shoes online and going out to eat with friends. A fundamental shift has taken place and we ache for something more, someone to give meaning to our existence, some purpose for life.

Wishing for a Messiah and awaiting the Messiah’s arrival is so much easier than having a Messiah.

The Biblical scholar and preacher Fred Craddock points out that when people are waiting for the Messiah, we tend to make the Messiah into what we want or need.

If we live in conflict, we say, “When the Messiah comes, there will be no more war.” If we are hungry, we say, “When the Messiah comes, there will be food enough for everyone.” If we are fighting disease or disaster, we say, “When the Messiah comes, there will be no more disease or suffering.”

Whatever our need is, the Messiah will fix it.

But the claim of the New Testament is that the Messiah has come, and he is Jesus.

And this Messiah does not accept the dictates of our human wants and plans: instead of the Messiah doing our bidding, the Messiah directs us, focuses us on the people of his concern, determines our marching orders. The Messiah provides the vision, sets the agenda, determines the path. It is not you and me who get to do that.

And that path is down the road to Jerusalem. That path is the reversal of human expectations regarding power and influence, where the least are the greatest of all and the most powerful is the one who serves all. The path of the Messiah is the path of the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the peacemaker, for it such folk who are truly blessed. It is a path that seems to lead to death and provides redemption in the midst of all that would destroy life.

It changed everything for the disciples, and it changes everything for us.

Jesus the Messiah places himself among the hungry, with the suffering, in company with sinners, at the bedside of the sick, out with the lost.

Jesus the Messiah encourages the poor, attends the children, engages the seeker, challenges the proud and powerful, disrupts business as usual in religion and commerce.

The language of those waiting for a Messiah gets changed from “When the Messiah comes, there will be no more hunger or suffering or cancer or homelessness” to “Where there is hunger, there the Messiah is. Where there is suffering, there the Messiah is. Where there is need, there the Messiah is.”

And Jesus the Messiah calls us to follow him into those places where human beings need redemption and justice and hope and new life. And that may be in places dark and fearful.

Are you ready to have a Messiah, or is it easier to make the Messiah into what you and I want and need?

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness asking himself what kind of Messiah he would be. I think the transitional period at First Presbyterian is an appropriate time to ask the question, “What kind of congregation will we be?”

Will we stand back hoping the Messiah will change the mess we are in, or will we have a Messiah that sends us out into the world to join him at work there?

The faithful response of Christians and congregations is always to tie who they are and what they will do to the life and direction of Jesus the Messiah.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”