

## Mark's "Temptation Story"

(Proverbs 1: 20-33; James 3: 1-12; Psalm 116; Mark 8: 27-38)

Troubled by the way his only son had turned out, a Jewish lawyer went to see his rabbi. "I brought him up in the faith, gave him a huge bar mitzvah, and it cost me a fortune to educate him, then he tells me last week he's decided to be a Christian. Rabbi, where did I go wrong?"

"Funny you should come to me, said the rabbi. I too brought up my only son in the faith, spent a fortune putting him through university to become a rabbi like me, then one day he says to me he has decided to become a Christian." "What did you do?" asked the lawyer. "I turned to *God* for the answer," replied the rabbi. "And what did God say?" pressed the lawyer. "God said, 'Funny you should come to me. Two thousand years ago, I had an only son...'"

This morning we continue in Mark's gospel and we pick up where we left off last week. You may recall that we were talking about how Mark likes to group stories together in his gospel, and how he will do so in two characteristic ways. Last week we saw his "bookends" technique, whereby Mark will place side by side two stories that might appear to be mirror image opposites of each other, just like bookends, and yet there will be a common thread connecting the two stories despite their differences, and that's the job of the reader—to figure out what that connection is. Today we see Mark's *other* favourite method for grouping gospel stories. This is the one I call his "sandwich" technique, where he takes three stories, the first and third of which are very similar. These two will form the outer layers, like the slices of bread in a sandwich. And right in the middle, you find a story that is very different, in the sense that it's richer and fuller and really gives you something to chew on, and this works like the meat in the sandwich. Our text this morning is the meat in a Markan sandwich. It also happens to be the biggest and most important sandwich that we find in Mark's entire gospel. This is clearly not one of those fancy little things with the crusts trimmed off and cut on the diagonal. This one is a foot-long feast, stuffed so full of meat that it takes two hands to hold it.

Let me tell you briefly about the stories that form the *bread* of this sandwich. The story that precedes our text is about the healing of a blind man. The central idea here is about *sight* miraculously restored through faith. The story that *follows* our text is the one about the Transfiguration, in which Jesus is miraculously changed in appearance. The disciples who witness this transfiguration also experience a change in *their* sight, in that they are suddenly able to see something they have never seen before, and that change also has to do with faith.

Right in the middle of these two stories about sight, we find today's lesson in which Jesus tests his disciples and presses them to answer who *they* think he is. To pass his test they will need a *special kind* of sight—*insight*, *spiritual* insight—and to answer his question they need to look first into the realm of faith. Who do *they* believe Jesus *really* is, and what does that *mean*? That question and the dialogue around it are right at the centre of this sandwich. The question is indeed something to chew on, something to be nourish every disciple along the way.

I should also point out that this question in our story is also right at the centre of Mark's gospel as a whole. That may not seem terribly significant to us, accustomed as we are to seeing the biblical text in *book* form. But to folks in the first century, who would have had their text written out on a roll of papyrus in scroll format, this is enormously significant because, you see, the scroll was always rolled back to the middle point when one finished reading, and hence when you first pick up the scroll and begin to unroll it, here you would see, right in the middle, as the first words that come into view, the question of Jesus, "Who do you say I am?" For Mark, this question *is* the *centre* of the gospel. This is the bull's eye. This is the question that faith in Christ must aim at and hit accurately, time and again. Who Jesus is and what discipleship is, are both at stake in the answer we give. And only through faith do you find the insight you need to answer the question.

It's a curious conversation that wraps itself around the central question. They're walking along the road, still on foreign turf far to the north of Israel, way up at the headwaters of the Jordan River. Jesus eases gently into his topic, first asking the disciples simply to report what others are saying about him. It's interesting that among the various replies on the *popular* perception of Jesus, none are calling him the *Messiah*. It's only when Jesus turns the question directly upon the disciples, pressing them to speak their *own* minds, that the idea of the Messiah is mentioned. This answer, from Peter's lips, is not *incorrect*. But there is a misunderstanding within his answer, and this is where the dialogue suddenly explodes into angry words.

What Jesus teaches here at the heart of Mark's gospel, and what he reveals here about the great secret that runs all the way through this gospel, is that he *is indeed* the Messiah, but *not* the one *they all expect*. The popular *traditional* expectation of the Messiah is that he would come in power to throw out the Romans and to build up their own Hebrew empire again. Jesus explains, in classic "good news/bad news" format, that he *is* the Messiah *but* they're not going to like it. He is going to be the Messiah who gets *rejected*. Almost beyond belief, he will be a Messiah who gets *killed, executed* in public with his own people screaming for his blood.

That's a shocking thing to say, isn't it? Can you feel it? If you have just enlisted as a follower, sold the farm or the fishing boats to follow him, it doesn't inspire confidence, does it? The shock of that statement has a powerful effect on Peter. Suddenly that disciple rises *above* his teacher, the *follower* comes around *in front* of the leader and Peter openly "rebukes" Jesus—tells Jesus he's wrong, that's a lie, that's *not* how it is, not how it's going to happen. No, screams Peter, you are *not* going to be killed, we won't let you and we won't follow you into failure! You're the Messiah, for heaven's sake! You don't *have* to have a cross! And that's when Jesus gives Simon Peter another nickname. This time Jesus calls him "Satan" and suggests that he get out of the way and back around behind. That's strong language for a gospel story, isn't it?

Here's your quiz question for today: where *else* in the gospels do you hear Jesus telling Satan to get out of the way and get back around behind? Do you recall another story where Jesus uses that

phrase? If you're thinking of the Temptation story that you find in Matthew chapter four and Luke chapter four, you're absolutely correct. Does Mark's gospel have a Temptation story? Think about it—on the first Sunday in Lent, do we ever read Mark's version of the Temptation Story? Well, no! In Mark's view, the moment Jesus appears on the scene, he gets baptized by John and goes straight to work. There's no detour through the wilderness, no *private* battles. His ministry, teaching and healing are all done *in public*. But in a somewhat stronger sense, I happen to think that Mark simply wasn't interested in that other Temptation story because it was too easy. That may sound a little odd, and the other gospels make it sound like a titanic battle on a worldwide scale. But here's how I think Mark might have seen it. That temptation story in the *wilderness* was too neat and tidy. The battle lines were too clearly drawn. There was Jesus, there was Satan, and the reader already knew which one was good and which one was going to win. Mark, on the other hand, can think of a temptation *much* tougher than *that*. How about the temptation that comes, not from the enemy, but from among your own circle of friends? How about the temptation, not to break the *biggest* law, but rather, just a *small* one? How about the temptation, not to sin, but just to cut a few corners and take the easy road?

This is Mark's version of the story about the Temptation of Jesus. The biggest and toughest temptation comes from his *own* disciples and friends. The temptation is simply to agree with Simon Peter, that rejection and a cross could be wrong, that he *could* establish his kingdom and he didn't have to *die* in order to do it. Just go along with your friends. Think of their feelings. Spare them the suffering. Go easy, and don't make discipleship any harder than it needs to be.

What a powerful temptation that must have been—and *still is*. Discipleship without a cross! A Messiah who only wins and never loses, who leads only on a wide and level path, whose example and teachings are genuinely *easy* to follow? Can you imagine how suddenly popular Christian faith would be? These buildings might be packed. That ugly cross on the wall, we could just cover it over—maybe with a projection screen!

If Simon Peter had won that temptation battle and got his wish for discipleship *without struggle*, without opposition, without trials, those followers of Jesus would have died out and disappeared in a matter of years. The church wouldn't have lasted a single generation. Did you know that when Mark began writing his gospel, it was just starting to happen that Christians were being hoisted on crosses all over the empire? Forceful suppression and public execution were just becoming synonymous with discipleship. In this story, at the very centre of his gospel, Jesus can speak *directly* to Mark's readers. He can speak to them, and *they* can identify with *him*. And to those disciples carrying real crosses, Jesus affirms clearly that this *is* how it *has to be*. The salvation he won came at a great price. There's no Messiah without a cross, and the same holds for discipleship.

The toughest temptation we Christians will ever face is the one that looks quite harmless and has a friendly face and whispers, "It's OK to cut corners. Take the short cut. Don't make this any harder than it needs to be. Keep a low profile, keep quiet. Be invisible."

If the example of Jesus in response to that kind of temptation has any meaning or incentive for us, then we can be perfectly sure of this, that following Christ will indeed require taking the hard road, making the tough decisions, speaking out on the most difficult and unpopular ethical issues, meeting more than just casual opposition and quite possibly losing whatever you hold most dearly. There's no other way to say it. This example and challenge Jesus gave us, not even Hollywood can make it fashionable and glamorous. There's an ugly wooden instrument of torture at the very heart of our faith. Jesus had his, and because of that and if we follow him like he commanded, we will have ours too.

It may be tempting to say that in nicer words, to dress it up with a cute illustration, to make that cross look a little prettier, or just to talk about *other* stuff instead. Tempting, yes, but I think we better not.

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