

Isaiah 50: 4-9a; Mark 8: 27-38

Will You Still Follow?

Isaiah 50: 4-9a: The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—

wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

5 The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards.

6 I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

7 The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;

therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

8 he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

9 It is the Lord God who helps me;

Mark 8: 27-38:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he 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. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘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? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

If you read my “pre-Sunday Congregational Life” email this week, you already know this, (if you’re not on my email list and would like to be, let me know) but I only recently learned the expression “North Star” as a metaphor for one’s guiding principle. According to a leadership coach Ramesh Ranjan from India, “psychologists and philosophers have used it as a metaphor for an unwavering and unchangeable ideal to follow in one’s life.” I heard “North Star” used in

this way for the first time during a panel discussion on spiritual care at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe.

In the Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus asked his disciples “who do you say that I am?” I might have responded “you are my North Star!” Well, not just “my” North Star; I might dare say for Christians, for the followers of Jesus, he is “the” North Star, the unwavering and unchangeable One to follow in our lives.” Like the physical North Star that is always where it’s supposed to be, Jesus the North Star is unwavering and unchanging, and we can always find our path by following him.

But it turns out that the North Star, although it is always where it’s supposed be, it is not always easy to spot it, because sometimes the sky is too cloudy or too bright with reflective city lights. Or, here in northern New Mexico, we can see so many bright stars that the North Star is obscured to our human eyes.

Well, Peter’s response to Jesus’ question “who do you say that I am,” was not the North Star but “You are the Messiah.” Bingo!...you would think. But Jesus “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” Jesus didn’t say Peter’s response was wrong, but for some reason, Jesus doesn’t want Peter or others to go around telling everybody he’s the Messiah.

When Jesus first asked the disciples who people were saying that he was, the disciples told him, “some say John the Baptist (you remember the King Herod thought Jesus must be John the Baptist come back to life when he first heard about him?) and some say Elijah, a prophet who revived a boy, and still others one of the prophets.” The people thought Jesus was nay of those things because of what they saw Jesus do.

Peter knew Jesus was more than those, and he correctly says Jesus is the Messiah, but he doesn’t fully understand what kind of Messiah Jesus is. You see, in Judaism, “Messiah” always meant the glorious future king of Israel, anointed by God, “greater” than other kings of the earth, who would save Israel from oppression. Remember, when Jesus was teaching and healing many people in Galilee and the people wanted to seize him and make him their king? Jesus got away from them because he is not an earthly king of a Messiah.

Up to this point, Jesus’ ministry has shown everyone his authority and power; authority over unclean spirits, teaching with authority, and power to feed and power to heal. When Peter said Jesus was the Messiah, he was also coming from this understanding of an all-powerful, glorious savior of Israel. But that’s not the whole picture of who Jesus is as the Messiah, not

even close. So, when Peter says, “you are the Messiah,” Jesus says, “don’t tell anyone yet; hold that thought!” Because there is more the disciples needed to learn about this Messiah.

So, Jesus began to teach them the rest of what his Messiahship is all about. Quite openly, Mark says, Jesus gave them the full picture, and that just blew Peter away... in a bad way. The Messiah must suffer, be rejected by the authorities and be killed? No, no, no, no, no.... Peters says. It seems that he didn’t even hear the last part “and after three days rise again.” Like the clouds or the city lights or too many bright stars obscure the North Star in our vision field, Peter’s preconceived notion about the Messiah, his attraction to the power and the might of an earthly king, closed Peter’s eyes and ears and mind to what Jesus had to teach him about who Jesus is as God’s anointed.

While Peter called Jesus the Messiah, Jesus here in Mark’s Gospel uses the title Son of Man to speak of himself. He doesn’t use other titles that have strong association with the worldly power. Jesus is not a worldly version of the Son of God; the Roman Emperor was that, or even of the Son of David, because the earthly King of Israel was called that. The Son of Man in the Hebrew Scripture is the righteous of Israel who suffer and then be vindicated by God. Son of Man actually experiences the plight of the people, and Jesus here takes on the figure of the Son of Man, who though he has authority, will suffer, die and rise again, and who will come in glory to judge and to reign.

But poor Peter cannot put his head around this totally new idea of a Messiah who has to suffer and die. Something is horribly wrong, he feels. Has he, Peter, made a huge mistake by following Jesus? How could he be following a teacher who seems to have got it all wrong? Is he going to drag me down that road, too? No, this cannot be. In panic, it seems, Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

At that moment Peter stepped out of line --- in fact, he was out of order. In rebuking Jesus, Peter acted as if he had authority over Jesus. Peter put himself “before” Jesus, instead of following him, as he had done thus far. At that moment, Peter made himself his North Star. Peter rejected Jesus, which ironically was the very thing he had feared... that Jesus should be rejected; and there he was, rejecting him.

Right then, Jesus did something curious: “turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ”Get behind me, Satan.” See, Peter had taken Jesus aside, stepping out of his proper place that is with other followers, and so Jesus turns to his followers, where Peter

also belongs, and says, “Peter, get behind me, for that is your place,” and plainly calls out Peter that he was holding onto his human blurred vision of the North Star and not setting his sight on the divine, True North Star.

Now, calling also the crowd, who were not necessarily his followers like the disciples but a curious bunch who seemed to gather around Jesus wherever he went those days, Jesus told everyone, “if anyone want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Up until then, Jesus everyone saw was full of power and authority; here on out, Jesus’ ministry is in the suffering, apparent defeat, taking an unexpected turn in the course his disciples had been following. Jesus redefines the “Messiah,” or Christ in Greek, in terms of the Son of man. Suffering and death will happen to him because Jesus is doing God’s will here on earth in the world as it is, which runs counter to that of the authorities of the world, religious and political.

Still following Christ means to take a place “behind” Christ and stay there. Will they still follow him when the world would call weak and a loser, .

But here is the thing, the part Peter apparently did not pay attention. Suffering is not for the sake of suffering, but for the sake of resisting and overcoming the forces of evil, Satan and other minions of the worldly force that oppose God’s loving will for the world. Suffering Jesus is talking about here is being subjected to injustice, which in his case took him to the cross. Nor is the suffering the end of the path for Jesus and for those follow him. God will raise them.

When you step up and stand up for someone suffering injustice, that same force of injustice will turn on you. When a young person can’t bear to watch her classmate get bullied day after day at school and decides to stand by his side as a friend, she risks being bullied, too. She may just be following her North Star, but she’s following Jesus, whether she knows it or not. When the doctors and aid workers go into the war zone with medicine and food to heal and feed those trapped there, the violence of the war will be unleashed upon them. They are following the North Star, and Jesus would consider them his family. “Whoever does the will of God is my mother and sister and brother.”

Who can say “yes” to such call if we first contemplate our ability to be so fearless and courageous? Not many of us. But the Scriptures tells us throughout, that God will not leave us alone. Like the prophet Isaiah reminded in today’s reading, “It is the Lord who helps me.”

Our moments of decision to follow Jesus need not be dramatic or traumatic. No matter how big or small a scale our suffering is, in Christ, God promises our redemption and resurrection on the other side of the suffering. Suffering and death are not the end for those who follow the path of the Christ, those who follow are alive forever, for God has conquered death in raising Christ.

As for Jesus' command to "deny yourselves," just don't do with your "self" what Peter did with his when he took Jesus aside and put himself as his North Star. "Denying oneself" is not to give up one's agency. God made each one of us and gave us agency, a healthy ego that's needed to function in the world. To see the "self" emerge in a young person is a beautiful thing. My daughter wrote a beautiful poem when she was 10 called "Following Myself," about the first time she walked to school by herself instead of following her Mom.

Having been given this "self" with agency, we must take care not to make it our own North Star, our own Savior. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, the bright North Star that shines our way.

In closing, I invite you to a brief imaginative meditation. Close your eyes, if you feel comfortable. And see with your mind's eyes a star in a night sky. That's your North Star, that shines bright with the energy that is God's love and life for the world. And notice a path that stretch from where you stand through the dark night to the Star. That is the path of Christ's loving kindness and Compassion. Let us follow him. Amen.