

Get Behind Me, Satan!

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Lent (February 28, 2021)

Mark 8:31-38

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(Intro story about truck with bible verse)

“Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering... and be killed, and after three days rise again.” The newly renamed Peter steps forward in reaction to this and confidently puts his foot in his mouth, as was his custom: *“Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him.”* This is a strange exchange: In Matthew’s account of this story, Peter addresses Jesus as “Lord,” indicating deference to his master but this even as he presumes to correct him. There is a dissonance and this, no doubt, is reflective of a dissonance in Peter’s mind. The Messiah, after all, was not supposed to suffer and die; he was supposed to win, not lose.

After Peter rebukes him, Jesus turns away from him and says, *“Get behind me, Satan!”* This is about as strong a reprimand as one could expect from him — I mean he wasn’t going to start swearing at him — because Satan is the power of darkness opposed to God! In Hebrew, Satan means “opponent.” So why does Jesus call Peter “Satan”? Well, Peter, like Satan earlier in the story during Jesus’ temptation in the desert, was trying to divert Jesus from his calling. God has a calling for each of us — a call for us to *live* and to grow into our divine human potential. But Satan is opposed to this growth. Later in the New Testament, in the first letter of Peter, we read, *“like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, seeking someone to devour. Resist him.”*

C.S. Lewis wrote, *“There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second is claimed by God, and counterclaimed by Satan.”* Jesus knew this, and was vigilant. In Matthew’s account, he says to Peter, *“You are a stumbling block to me.”* This can also be translated, “you are a hindrance” or “obstacle,” or even, “you are an occasion for sin.” Jesus goes on to name the cause of Peter’s error: he says *“You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,”* or, *“You are thinking not as God does, but as [humans] do.”* So, Peter’s perspective is off, and yet his perspective is entirely reasonable, natural, understandable; he doesn’t want Jesus to die!

Peter here is nothing if not relatable because even with faith, it's often hard to see the whole picture; to think as God thinks. Augustine wrote, "When I first knew you [God], you made me see that there was something to see and that I was not yet able to see it." While Peter's situation is relatable and natural, and therefore one that we can have compassion and patience for, there is also a danger of patience becoming complacency, leading us to conveniently mistake our ways for God's ways. When natural things look most divine, the devil is around the corner.

Perhaps this is why Jesus calls us *beyond* the purely natural. He says, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" He calls us to deny our natural self; in some sense, to put it to death. That is, to put our egocentricity to death — the part of us that's always thinking about "I, Me, Mine" — *this is my life, my plans, my car, my phone, my family, my church. I heard my friends were planning something, I hope they invite me. I wonder if anyone will ask me what I think about this.*

It's not that the ego is bad, it's just that it's incomplete; it's a partial view of reality, and yet it often mistakes itself for the whole thing, and so it needs to be humbled; put in its place. The problem with living from the ego is that it places us as the center of existence which is of course just not true. From this egocentric way of being, our primary concerns are self-preservation, security, protection. We're obsessed with ourselves and our place in the world and this quickly becomes a life dominated by fear: fear of either real, exaggerated, or outright imaginary threats to our *self*. Perhaps we can see some of this in Peter's disorientation at Jesus' words about his death; Peter was expecting a triumphant Messiah who would improve the circumstances of his life, and he had, of course, also developed a deep love and attachment to Jesus. So Peter felt threatened by Jesus' words. He was afraid.

There is, of course, a place for healthy fear that might better be described as caution. Unhealthy fear, however, is what we get when our ego is in command, and this is toxic not only for us but also for the world. Jesus revealed this in his crucifixion because it was the egocentricity of religious and political rulers, themselves ruled by fear, that perceived Jesus as a threat and put him to death. The irony there is that Jesus is life, and so in our confusion about what life really is, we not only turn away from life; we destroy life. And so, in a real sense, our natural self or ego must die if we are to be fully alive in Christ.

And so Jesus says: *“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.”* There is a fullness of life available in Christ that is so much greater than we are often able or willing to imagine, but to lay hold of it we must first surrender entirely to God and say “get behind me, Satan!” to all that tempts us away from this. It’s so important to “starve the ego and feed the soul.” And yet, it often seems like just about everything in our culture is geared to do the opposite. So, what in your life feeds the ego and starves your soul? What things are tempting you to turn away from the life God is calling you to? To what do you need to say, “Get behind me, Satan”?

Let us not settle for anything less than the fully-alive-life available to us in Christ and say “no” to fear, and “no” to old patterns and conditioning. Let us say “Get behind me, Satan!” to all of that and say “yes” to growth, and “yes” to the way, the truth, and the life that is in Christ and that *is* Christ.

May you offer yourself daily to him as a living sacrifice. He will accept your offering and give you back so much more.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”