

The Call to a Difficult Journey

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February 5, 2012. Pastor Keith's sermon today is on Jesus' rejection in Nazareth, from Mark 6. Jesus did not receive a hero's welcome, because the people didn't want to hear what he had to say. We would probably prefer a more divine kind of messiah too. But we are reminded that the calling of a Christian to faith is a call to a difficult journey.

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We look a little further at this long reading from Mark. We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I think most people probably think of Jesus as a kind person, a pleasant person, someone to help people, and someone who cares about them a lot in a tender way. Often Jesus is pictured as a good shepherd, someone who cares for people in that way. He knows his flock. He cares for each lamb with untiring devotion and concern, and they maybe think of him as a mild and meek person. "Pleasant" and "attractive" are some of the adjectives that might go with his name. We think of him as the kind of person we may eagerly bring home to meet the family and be around the table with us. But in our lesson today we hear of a day when Jesus came home to his family, to his neighbors. And when he did, he received a mixed reaction. They no doubt heard about his teaching and healing. That reputation had gone before him as he had been out and about, now came back to Nazareth. And we might think he should have gotten a hero's welcome for being this person from a small town. Now he's making such a commotion in the countryside that he's become a hero in a sense, the good things he says and the miracles he does. It says they were astounded at what he said, and there was lots of amazement.

But the point of our reading today is that they actually didn't receive him with the hero's welcome. Maybe they used it as an excuse. Because they didn't really want to hear what he had to say, because it cut them and was a way to call them to repent before God, they said well, he was the carpenter's son. He was a carpenter himself. He wasn't a religious professional. He's Mary's boy. He's got four brothers that are named in the text, and sisters. He's just one of the family kids down the block. We don't need to listen to him. So either because they didn't want to hear his words, or because they just said it didn't fit with who they thought the messiah was to be, they used every reason they could to discount what he said. The first reason was that he was a carpenter. How could a carpenter say such words about God? He wasn't a rabbi. He wasn't theologically trained. He wasn't the son of a priest. He had no credentials of any kind for the kinds of things he was saying and doing, and they were pretty emphatic saying he's just a guy from a regular family -- maybe even one of the poorer families in town at that. It names his four brothers and talk says he has sisters. If he's just a regular guy from a regular family, how could he be a person of God?

The problem seemed to be that he was speaking the word of God with authority, and he was doing the works of God -- healing and teaching. But they didn't believe that God would work through such an ordinary person as this Jesus guy they'd always known. They either seemed to think he was unbalanced in his thinking, or just saying things that would put him in danger. In an earlier lesson in Mark, Jesus is speaking and his family wants to come and kind of rescue him -- take him out of a house -- and he refuses to go with them. He says everybody here's my brother and my sister, so these are my family. So we don't know at that point if the family was trying to prevent him from being ridiculed, or to keep him from being arrested. But his own family was trying to withdraw him from a social scene. It seems like

the people knew him as a person, and what they expected was a message. When the messiah came through they thought we could know this message. But when it came through a person who lived in their midst, they found this offensive. How could this person be God? How can this person live out God? This is offensive to us. And they couldn't believe that this was a person of God.

We don't know what his particular message was on that occasion in Nazareth. It doesn't say here. From other gospels we know that at other times when he spoke in Nazareth -- because he blasphemed and said that these words were fulfilled in their hearing and said as much, that he was God -- they wanted to put him to death right away. But for this crowd, he was too much of an ordinary town boy, too much a regular carpenter to be a regular religious teacher and miracle performer. And so they resisted him with all their might.

I think we have to admit in our time there's a resistance that we have to Jesus too. He was awfully ordinary, in a way. He was one who suffered abuse. He was one who died for the cause. When those people come along, can we really say that this person was a person of God? He challenges us. In our day and age we tend to prefer someone more spectacular, someone more successful, someone more extravagant than what God gives us in Jesus: this carpenter guy who goes around has kind of a motley crew following him, and ends up on a cross. We'd probably too, like the people of Nazareth, really prefer a divine kind of messiah that comes with all the signs of a messiah, rather than a human messiah who was fully human. And so we in our minds sometimes try to "upgrade" Jesus. We try to transform this carpenter to kind of a Superman, who relentlessly battles for truth, justice, and the American way -- and of course always prevails as he does it. The Jesus as a Superman looks like a person, but inside this Superman Jesus is more than human. He wouldn't be killed and then rise again -- he'd be smart enough not to be killed in the first place. So as humans, we think we'd rather be taken out of our humanity also and say, "God, rather than save me as a human being so I have to go through more days like this, why don't you be a Superman to me and take me out of where I am as a human being, so that I can live above all this fray that I have every day." So our inclination is to make Jesus someone more divine than human and to wish that God would take us somehow away from this world of all of our troubles. We'd like to rise above it.

The resistance of the town people to Jesus results in a very low number of miracles being performed there. He could do no mighty acts there, it says, except that he healed a few sick people. Sounds big enough by itself. But in other places he'd done much more than that. What Mark says is that there were just a very few miracles done there because there were very few believers. They didn't believe in him, so he could do no actions. It had to be faith that received these miracles for the miracles to happen. When we think about it, in Mark's gospel there's really more authority and power of Jesus shown over things of nature than over people. Jesus heals diseases. He casts out demons. He orders the wind to be calm. But he doesn't control people or dictate what they do. They're on their own for that. He commands people to be quiet about the miracles he's performed on them, and they go do the opposite: they tell everybody they can find. So he didn't have control over people. They feel like they need to tell others, and so even if Jesus tells them to be quiet they don't. He can't tell people what to do. And this all points to the fact that since Jesus doesn't control human beings, it's more the people's attitudes or faith in him that determines what he can do among them. Whether it's in his time or our time, it's a faith that receives what Jesus does. If the faith isn't there, the actions won't be there.

He can't help people who don't desire to be healed. Jesus can't forgive people who don't want to be forgiven. He can't teach people who have closed minds and don't want to be taught. He can't bring new life to people who have no desire for it. He can't create peace among people who prefer to live in worlds of hate and revenge. There has to be a faith and an openness to what Jesus has, to receive it.

And so this means the attitude that we have towards Jesus affects the works that he can do among us in our time. It's our faith that brings Jesus into our lives. It's our faith that transforms us to be people who are not only nurtured by him in different ways, but also turned into people who will serve him.

Some of the reports I've heard from missionaries over the years in different cultures, some of those who have attended faith healing events too, say the same thing: that it takes a person willing to believe for this thing to happen. That is, if the culture is open and believes that there are evil spirits and demons, then it's possible to have exorcisms and so forth, and that kind of thing is alive and well. Or if there are people open to having words said and be healed by what we call "faith healing," then it can happen. But where a culture is, shall we say, scientific and doesn't believe that those things exist, then the things don't happen. But you can go to different places in the world today where the culture allows these things and believes that they are there, and the healings and exorcisms and that things like that can happen.

To show how transformative Jesus is, Jesus calls the disciples to himself. He says this is Nazareth, let's go on now. And he sends them out. He walks among the villages and says: you go out two by two. Go into the villages around here. And these disciples were able to heal people and they were able to forgive sins. The group goes out with a sign of the good that can come with a person who follows the Lord. There was faith with the disciples. When Jesus told them, they believed it and they did it. They could heal people. And the people that they encountered evidently believed too, because once he left Nazareth there were all kinds of healings that happened. The disciples do well. They're excited when they get back. They've been able to do these things. They believed, and they performed many miracles of healing.

Well, this all led to a lot of confusion in that day about who Jesus was. They didn't know what to make of him. Jesus caused such a clamor because of his healings and the words he said, that word about him got out -- even rose up to the leaders, to Herod, ruler of his territory in Galilee. And Herod wanted to know: is this guy human? Or is this guy of God? And Herod had John the Baptist on his mind, since he had put him to death. And so he says this Jesus must be John the Baptist come back to life again. So that was one of the theories that was out there: Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life again. The fact that John had lived his life and then met with such a horrible end is a warning, alongside the other lessons of today, that there is rejection. Whenever the ministry of Jesus is in action, there's rejection. The people of Nazareth rejected him. The authorities rejected John the Baptist. Herod rejected him so much he killed him. Jesus, when he tells the disciples to go out, he says: be prepared, people will reject you. So he tells them to shake the dust off their feet when they're done with the town, if they've been rejected there. The follower of Jesus finds resistance. Just as John found it, Jesus found it, and the disciples found it. Mark wants to prepare us all for that fact. If we're transformed, believing in ministry in the same style Jesus had, we will encounter resistance. It's part of being a disciple.

The calling of a Christian to faith is a call to a difficult journey. It's not putting on the Superman cape and thinking that everything's going to be great. It's willingly enrolling in a life of servanthood, even though there are many opportunities for joys and for thanksgivings at every turn on this journey. Even though there are difficulties along the path, many fulfillments come with it. All of the parts of our reading today hint that when the truth of Jesus gets close to people, they react to it. Often it's a word that calls to a different kind of life, and says the life you're living right now isn't very close to what God wants for you. And you hear that word and it changes you. Sometimes it's the application of God's law, and we find out that strikes a nerve and there's a strong reaction. What we're doing isn't fitting what God wants for us very well.

The word that Jesus spoke at his home church hit a nerve and energized that crowd against him very much. He spoke and brought up things that were very close to home for them. They didn't want to hear and learn what Jesus had to say. So they used his humanity as grounds against him. We don't want to hear this, they said. So they kind of covered their ears and said: you're too human for us. You're too ordinary for us. We don't want to hear it, whether it's right or not. Jesus knows that the disciples, as they said, will find this resistance as they go out. Some will welcome the word and some will not. And then when we hear about the story of John the Baptist again, we hear in a horrible recounting of his death that it was all about his speaking a word that hit a nerve. He called what Herod was doing wrong. He said you're committing adultery with your brother's wife. You shouldn't be doing that. And it met resistance that hit a nerve and it ended up causing him to lose his head. Herod and his wife then are angry with John. He points out what's not right and it costs him, and they get rid of him.

So the word comes close to all of us, and when it does we react. It reminds us of who we are and reminds us of who we aren't. It convicts us of the wrongs that we've done. It reminds us how we don't like a Jesus too much like us, and how we are slow to serve. As he sent the disciples out, maybe we're a little slow to get in gear to serve as he wants us to. The word of Jesus comes and shows us our moral weaknesses, reminds us that as we follow Jesus, others will be out to pull us away and take us away from this mission of the Lord. It's not an easy path. But it also reminds us that we are children with Jesus in baptism, children of God. We are brothers and sisters of Jesus. It reminds us that we can celebrate the humanity of Jesus because that means he is like us. We are like him. He is one of us. He got into the water and was baptized as we were baptized. He entered into our world. He knows what we go through. So we can build up faith, so that we can receive the miracles, so that we can receive the healing. We can receive the forgiveness that he wants us to have. To those who believe, there is much to be received. God is there. He wants to give it. Believe and it will come to you. So we keep the faith so that we can receive the wonderful gifts God has in mind for us. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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