

It's a harsh rebuke. In chapter 8 of Mark, Peter had just become the first of the disciples to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed. As I said 2 weeks ago, chapter 8 is actually the turning point in Mark. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter jumps out there and says, "You're the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed servant."¹ Peter gives the perfect answer.

As I said 2 weeks ago, this is the turning point in Mark. The big question for the entire first half of Mark has been answering the question, "Who is this Jesus?" And now one of his disciples has finally recognized that he is God's Messiah, he is the Christ.

And that's the end of the first half of Mark. Now the disciples know who Jesus is.

But the entire second half of Mark focuses on another question, a new question. And that question is basically a follow up question. OK, now you know that Jesus is the Messiah. But what does it mean that he is the Messiah? What kind of Messiah is he? A military leader like his ancestor King David? Or something different?

And Jesus starts this section by telling his disciples that it's something different. Jesus will be a VERY different kind of Messiah. Not a military revolutionary leader, but rather a suffering servant. Thus Jesus says that he has to undergo great suffering, and be killed, and on the third day rise again.

And Peter who blurted out the perfect answer three verses earlier now blurts out the wrong thing. Jesus has to suffer and die?

Peter begins to rebuke Jesus. In Matthew's version, Peter adds "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."²

And Jesus gives what seems a very harsh response. Peter rebukes Jesus. And Jesus in turn rebukes Peter:

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."³

Youch. And in Matthew Jesus adds one additional phrase:

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."⁴

So what's Jesus saying: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me..."?

Several things here. First, the Satan piece.

¹ Mk 8:29

² Mt 16:22

³ Mk 8:33

⁴ Mt 16:23

The word Satan is a title, not a proper name. It means the adversary, the enemy, the opponent, the one who literally stands in opposition.

If Jesus says that his mission is self-sacrifice, and suffering, and death, and if Peter says, "No it's not!", then he is in direct opposition to the core of Jesus' purpose and mission. That's the thrust of the entire second half of Mark. Jesus is called to go to Jerusalem, and to suffer, and to die. And at the end, as he does so, even the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail realizes exactly who Jesus is and what his death reveals. Not only is he the Messiah. He is something more. As he looks at the Crucified Messiah, the centurion says, "Truly this man was God's Son!"⁵

So anything standing in the way of Jesus' fulfilling his mission is an obstruction, an impediment, an opponent, a Satan. At one level Jesus is saying, 'Get out of my way Peter. Don't block this path. Don't be a stumbling block to me.'

But he's also saying something else. Not just get out of my way. But "get behind me." Get behind me can mean get on board or get with the program. But it's also been used already in Mark's Gospel in reference to Peter, way back in chapter 1. Jesus calls Peter to leave his nets behind. And Peter gets behind him, in English it's translated as "follow."

Get behind me Satan is harsh language. But it's also clear language. Jesus is telling Peter in no uncertain terms to not block him on the way to Jerusalem and to the cross, and also to follow him on that way.

Anything less, and anything else is Peter thinking in earthly terms rather than in heavenly terms:

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Four weeks ago, I mentioned in my sermon St. Augustine's monumentally important work, *The City of God*. I said that Augustine drew on 2 images and contrasted them: the idea of Christians being citizens of an earthly city, versus being citizens of the City of God, God's heavenly city.

For now, we carry dual citizenship. Christians are part of the earthly city. But our primary allegiance is to the City of God. And Augustine says in no uncertain terms that true and perfect peace will never be found in any earthly city, or country, or empire. Only the City of God, only God's Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven will bring ultimate peace.

If Peter follows the playbook of the Earthly City, then the sacrifice and execution of his Teacher, his Master, his Lord is unthinkable. It's no wonder he rebukes Jesus.

But Jesus in turn rebukes Peter. Because Jesus' kingdom is not from this world. It transcends this world. God's heavenly city, God's kingdom demands our ultimate allegiance.

⁵ Mk 15:39

And we often get tangled up the same way Peter gets tangled up. We get tangled up if we confuse earthly values with God's values. And in our context, this often applies to our politics. Politics are important. And they are especially important for citizens like we are of a democratic republic. But our politics don't define our ultimate identity, and they are never of ultimate importance.

And if we put our ultimate trust in the political process or in politicians, then we are probably going to be sorely disappointed. This is especially true in a country like ours with a two-party system, where power switches back and forth between those parties. That means the chances are VERY high that at times we will have to live with politicians in charge whom we disagree with, whom we did not vote for, whom we may even think are misguided or corrupt or even dangerous.

During my lifetime, for example, the presidency has been pretty evenly split between the two parties. It hasn't exactly been 50/50. But it's been 55/45, which is mathematically pretty close.

So if we start thinking when our preferred candidate wins that salvation has come, then we have a spiritual problem. Only God is the source of salvation.

Or conversely if, when the other side wins, we think that it's unmitigated disaster, then we're also likely to be in trouble spiritually. Because no matter who is in office temporarily, God is always and ultimately in charge.

And even if, God forbid, one day our entire political system comes crashing down, as Christians we must always hold on to this core fact. Our primary identity can never come from any earthly city, even one as wonderful as the United States of America. Our primary allegiance is to the Kingdom of God.

As Jesus adds at the end of our Gospel lesson, what good is it to gain the entire earthly city but lose out spiritually? "What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?"⁶

It's a pretty hard message to wrap our minds around. "Get behind me, Satan!" That's a tough wake-up call to Peter.

But it's also an invitation. "Get behind me," Jesus says, "Follow me."

'Set your mind on divine things,' Jesus is saying.

'Take up your cross, take up the way of self-sacrifice.

And 'Follow me.'

⁶ Mk 8:36 NLT