

There are definitive moments in history, watershed moments. This weekend, September 11, 2001, comes to mind. A few of you are too young to remember it. But for most of us here, that morning 20 years ago marked a point when things dramatically changed. Everything afterwards would somehow be different.

We've been reading through the Gospel of Mark since December of last year. And in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is at THE watershed point in Mark, the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter.

The first four verses from today's Gospel lesson are the climax, the pinnacle of the first half of Mark. Everything in the first part of Mark has been leading up to this point.

In entire first half of Mark there is a repeating pattern. People don't know who Jesus truly is.

In Mark, the reader knows who Jesus is from the beginning. Mark says it in chapter 1 verse 1: Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

And the demons know who Jesus is in the first half of Mark. As one of them says to him in chapter 1: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?... I know who you are, the Holy One of God."<sup>1</sup>

So the readers of Mark know who he is. And even the demons in Mark know who Jesus is. But in the first half of Mark, the disciples and the people that Jesus interacts with don't really know who he is. And so there's a repeating pattern.

Jesus does miraculous things. And over and over again we're told that the people are astounded, or the people are amazed, or the people ask, "Who is this guy? What kind of man can do these things?"

But no one truly knows who Jesus really is. They wonder. But they never quite get who he really is.

So today we hear Jesus say to his disciples, 'How about you guys?' "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter says, "You are the Messiah."<sup>2</sup> 'You're the Christ. You're God's anointed leader who will come and save us.'

It's a great answer. It's an answer that steps out in faith. 'Lord, after hanging out with you all this time, we know you're something special. You are the one God has sent to lead, and because we believe that, we'll follow.' For the first time, Jesus' disciples begin to get it, they begin to understand who Jesus is. Gold star for Peter.

But then we hit that watershed moment. We cross the line. Now the disciples know who Jesus is: the Messiah, God's anointed.

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<sup>1</sup> Mk 1:21

<sup>2</sup> Mk 8:29

But now, for the second half of Mark the question is no longer "Who is Jesus?" Now the question is, "What kind of Messiah will Jesus be?"

The disciples in ch8 would have had some rather clear ideas about how they expected things should play out:

Jesus is the Messiah. That means that job #1 for him is to bring political freedom. Let the revolution begin. The Romans, the foreign occupiers will be kicked out. And they'll have their own country back.

That's what they're expecting. Political and military victory over Israel's enemies. And freedom for the Jewish people. That's the expected Messiah playbook.

But Jesus has a VERY DIFFERENT game plan. The disciples expect to see the beginning of a revolution. But Jesus begins to teach them that he 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."<sup>3</sup>

Suffer? Be killed? What kind of play book is that for a military leader?

Messiahs win by inflicting suffering and killing Israel's enemies. They're not supposed to suffer and die themselves.

Peter says as much. Peter begins to rebuke Jesus. Rebuke is a very strong word. It's what you do to a demon. Peter must be thinking something like, 'Jesus must have something really wrong with him if he's talking about suffering. Let's get our Messiah back on track.'

But Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter. He says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is saying, 'You think there's something wrong with me? Well Peter, that kind of thinking comes from the evil one. If you think that way, you're setting yourself in opposition to God's plan. You want to be my follower?'

Then, Jesus says, "deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."

Jesus is telling Peter, 'You say I'm the Messiah. That's great. That's step 1. But if you want to follow me as Messiah, you need to move to step 2. You need to get on board with my game plan. Follow me by taking up your cross.'

Jesus is telling Peter, 'Don't pretend you know what my game plan should be. Instead, listen to me, and follow the game plan I'm actually laying out. I'm going to be sacrificially loving and serving others by taking up my cross. You need to do the same thing.'

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<sup>3</sup> Mk 8:31

<sup>4</sup> Mk 8:33

In life we often think we know how things will or at least should play out. And we're often upset or shocked when they don't go our way.

For those who remember September 11, 2001, I don't know about you, but I was pretty content that morning. Things were going well in my life, personally and professionally. And I thought things were going reasonably well in the world.

The Cold War had basically been over for a decade. Our country was the only remaining super-power. The dark cloud I grew up with of nuclear annihilation would be something my young children wouldn't have to worry about. And given our military might as a country, I thought we were very secure.

The shock of September 11 changed all that. My illusions of security went up in flames and collapsed in the rubble of those terrorist attacks.

And my dreams for the future had to change. The past 20 years have not been a golden era in our nation's history. It's been a difficult century so far. I thought my children would grow up in a better world than the one I grew up in. In some ways it is better. In many other ways it is not.

It's hard to believe that it's been 20 years since 9/11. I'm still amazed at the kinds of feelings it brings up. Even watching a late 20<sup>th</sup> century movie that might have an incidental shot of the World Trade Center can dredge up those old feelings of sadness.

Seven months after 9/11 I had the privilege to visit Ground Zero in New York. It was powerful and moving to stare down into that pit, the footprint of the towers. By that time the excavation and removal of the rubble was nearly complete. But I thought that void, that huge physical hole, in many ways symbolized a deeper emotional and spiritual void felt by all of us.

But I was encouraged that day as well. I had the privilege to visit the ministry of St. Paul's Chapel, a block away from the World Trade Center. The chapel had been built in 1766. It was an historic Episcopal Church where George Washington worshipped.

And somehow, it was largely unharmed by the collapse of the twin towers. I will tell you, it was sobering to stand outside the church and still see debris in the trees 7 months after 9/11. Some of it was old pieces of paper that had rained down from the World Trade Center. But there was ash in the trees as well. And I couldn't help wondering if some small portion of those ashes came from human beings.

But I was extremely encouraged when we moved into St. Paul's Chapel. In the days following 9/11, St. Paul's became a place of ministry and rest and respite for all of the rescue and recovery workers.

Police officers, fire fighters, recovery workers would sleep in the pews. The finest restaurants in New York would provide them with food. There were counseling services.

Massage therapists and podiatrists and countless others were there to minister to those who had been laboring around the clock for 7 months.

I was talking to one NYPD lieutenant. And he kept telling me, "Thank you for all you're doing." I tried to tell him, he needed the thanks. I was just a visiting priest, at that time from Kansas. But he kept saying, "I know, but you're a part of this church. Thank you for all you've been doing."

And that was a powerful lesson to me about moving forward. My hopes and dreams about the future world my children would live in had been dashed. There was an empty place in my psyche, as empty as the pit of the former World Trade Center.

And yet I was greatly encouraged by the examples of self-sacrifice from the recovery workers I met in New York City. And I was proud of the servant ministry that the Episcopal Church was offering them through St. Paul's Chapel.

This weekend amongst all the reporting and the memories of the survivors from 20 years ago, I heard the testimony from one man<sup>5</sup> who escaped from the 105<sup>th</sup> floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center. He talked about heading down the fire stairwell. He said, "There were people in there in real need, coming off of crutches or canes or in wheelchairs. And guys just like you and me, we're helping people down the steps, both physically and emotionally. And that right there, that togetherness... there was no black or white, there was no Jew or Christian, there was no red or blue... it was just human beings, and that's what we need to strive to every day."

Jesus told Peter to change his thinking. Victory would not come through some sort of military revolution against the occupying Roman Empire. Jesus would win the victory by serving and loving others. Jesus would conquer by suffering and dying, and by rising to life again.

For most of us taking up our cross won't mean suffering and dying for our faith. But for all of us it definitely means that we are called to serve and love others. It means treating others as fellow human beings regardless of our differences. It means seeing each other as fellow children of God. We have to change our thinking and act accordingly. And in doing so, we can begin to live in the power of the resurrection.

It's important to know who Jesus is, to proclaim him as Lord and Savior. That's step 1. But then you're called to step 2. You have to walk in his footsteps and seek to do what he would do.

Serve others. Love others. In doing so, take up your cross and follow.

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Dittmar