

Sermon February 25, 2024
[Mark 8:31-38]

"Get Behind Me, Satan!"
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago we heard the story of the Transfiguration. Most scholars see the Transfiguration as a foreshadowing of the Resurrection. Indeed, we see in the story the change in Jesus's appearance, and we learn that his clothes take on the color of a dazzling white, all of which anticipates the way Paul describes the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. He writes, "Listen, I will tell you a mystery. We will not all die, but we will all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."

The story of the Transfiguration, in short, is a glimpse of the future, not only of Jesus's destiny as the first fruits of God's new creation, but of ours to follow as well.

Today, however, I want to buck this scholarly trend. I want to push back, and argue that there is a more pivotal foreshadowing of the Resurrection, not in Mark 9, which talks about the Transfiguration, but in Mark 8, our Gospel Reading for today. Here Jesus sets his sight on Jerusalem, refusing the threat of death – if I may quote the great Bono of U2 – "in the name of love," anticipating the deleterious consequences of these decisions. Jesus knows going forward that if he continues to do what he's doing, he will gain the attraction of the authorities and ultimately they will be his downfall. The religious leaders, as well as the Romans, will execute him.

And here you can see what I like to call "the Second-to-Last Temptation of Christ," – not in the Garden. It appears rather in the words of Peter the Apostle, who represents each of us. "You should not do this," he says. "You can save yourself. Just turn back from the uncertainties of Jerusalem to the familiarity of Nazareth. Don't go."

Now I think Peter's intentions here are pretty darn good. Neither he nor the disciples want Jesus to throw himself in harm's way unnecessarily. What's the point? he might be asking. You can also see here the affection Peter has for Jesus, as do the disciples; they don't want him to die. All he has to do therefore, is turn back.

But Jesus recognizes the temptation, which is why he invokes the name of Satan. "Get behind me, Satan," he says, "for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things; Not on the things of God, but," as older translations read, "the things of man."

"Get behind me, Satan." Now, what on earth does that mean, "Get behind me, Satan"? I think it's Jesus's way of saying, literally, "Get behind me."

"As my disciple, you need to fall back in line." In other words, "Take up your cross, follow me, back me up and do as I do. Turn with me into the headwinds of violence, brutal oppression, dictatorship and death, in the name of love, life, liberation and

justice. Lose yourself," he says, "and you will save yourself." You will save your integrity. You will save your faithfulness. You will save who and what God calls you to be, that is, a courageous follower of Jesus Christ into the fray.

Now if you want a *true* foreshadowing of the Resurrection, *this is it*. Here we have no change in outward appearance, like we did with the Transfiguration; no cameo appearances of Moses and Elijah, who I'm sure were compensated properly, who represent the Law and the Prophets; and of course, no Voice from Heaven, which speaks, one chapter later, for the last time in the Gospel of Mark; thereafter, God remaining silent.

Instead of an external Transfiguration, in other words, Jesus speaks of an *inner* transformation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, "by dying to sin," which is to say, by dying to selfishness and fear, "we are invited to rise to new life as men and women, as people, for others."

Jesus himself speaks of this change of heart or disposition immediately after he rebukes Peter. "If any want to become my followers," – or I might say 'If anyone wishes to get behind me' – "let them deny themselves, 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."

The apostle Paul says something similar in Galatians 2. He writes, "For through the law, I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, so that it is no longer I who live – there's the death, metaphorically – but Christ who lives in me" – there's the resurrection, metaphorically. "And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Zen Buddhists are apparently a big fan of Paul, and this passage is why they recognize that what Paul is arguing for is the death of the ego; the death of a self-centered self that lives only for itself, and that seeks eternal life and heaven, because only the ego wants to get into heaven.

What Paul's calling for, instead, is to set the ego aside, to crucify oneself, such that one no longer lives simply for oneself, but for others as well.

That's the heart of resurrection. That's the heart of most of my preaching. God calls us to *more* than simply living for ourselves. God calls us to *live for others*.

Likewise, for a metaphorical account of resurrection as inner transformation, we can go to Colossians 3 which says, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

Once again, resurrection as a disposition. You have *already been raised*, the offer suggests. Now I use Martin Luther here to push back on this passage and say God isn't "up there somewhere," beyond the clouds of heaven, but God is everywhere, in, with and under all things. And Christ who is at God's right hand is likewise everywhere, in with, and under all things.

And this one's for free: that viewpoint is called panchristusism, which is really fun to throw around at dinner parties.

In all of these cases, the resurrection involves not simply a change in outer appearance, but a transformation from within. The Resurrection, we discover, is the power to live and experience new life, here and now. It is not simply an event for which we wait—although it is that too—but a *present reality* available to each of us, right now, in Jesus Christ.

“Now is the day of salvation,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians. Paul adds in Romans 8, “If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies, also through His Spirit that dwells in you.”

In other words, the power of renewal is something that comes from God, something that will raise you from death to new life for others. “When the threat of death is refused,” write the feminist theologians Joanne Brown and Rebecca Parker, “and the choice is made for justice, for radical love, and liberation, the power of death is overthrown. Resurrection means that death is overcome in those precise instances when human beings choose life courageously, refusing the threat of death.”

And that, of course, is precisely what Jesus does in today's Gospel.

Now, why is it that we never hear of resurrection as inner transformation that leads to new life? Why is it always something that we have to *believe* in, that he was bodily resuscitated, and that somehow constitutes what it means to have faith or be a good Christian?

Well, I think the answer is simple. As Soren Kierkegaard reminds us, “It is a lot easier to *worship* Jesus Christ than take up your cross and follow him.” Let me repeat that: “It is a lot easier to worship Jesus Christ than to take up your cross to follow him.”

I'm going to make a claim here about most mega-churches in this country, that are fixated on worshipping Jesus the man, which theologians call Jesus-olatry or Christ-olatry. Instead of actually following Him, they step back and sit back, doing the easy thing by simply believing in him, as if an act of goodwill, or a belief in this regard is enough to merit salvation from God.

I'm going to take this one step further. It is a lot easier to *believe* in the resurrection of the dead than it is to *live* it. Yet, as the Apostle Paul claims, “because of the Spirit, who enables, empowers and renews our inner being,” we *can* live it—and here are three ways:

Number one, *go the extra mile for other people*. You have a friend in need? Don't just pray for them. Don't send them good vibes. Lose yourself for a moment. Call them, see them, send a card to them, encourage them, do something for them—and then pay attention to how you feel afterward. You have just been briefly liberated from self in a life toward others. That's a Christ moment. That's a resurrection moment. Those moments should fill all of our lives.

Not only should you go the extra mile for your neighbor, you should also, number two, *be an ally of the marginalized*. Jesus didn't eat with kings and queens. He didn't eat with presidents and politicians. He died with sinners and tax collectors. Now think here of the people we ostracize or scapegoat in society. People like immigrants, for example, who are reduced by our former President to the status of vermin; or the poor, who are constantly blamed for their own poverty. Find ways, in contrast, to support these people, the men and women the novelist Thomas Cahill calls, "the little ones of history." In so doing, you may experience another resurrection moment, where you are briefly liberated from yourself and your daily preoccupations to be there for others, especially those who are marginalized.

Finally, after going the extra mile, and becoming an ally of the marginalized, don't *give in to fear*. It is easy, so easy, and so tempting, to hunker down when times are tough. It is easy, and we are tempted to do this in our congregation, to give ourselves over to a narrative of scarcity. "We don't have enough money. We don't have enough people. We don't have enough of this, we don't have enough that; therefore we shouldn't move forward."

It is easy to turn from the face of Christ in the stranger, a homeless person or someone who is suffering. I remember being downtown several years ago, and I had a conversation with a gentleman who was from Africa. And he was asking for money, but we talked at some length. And at the end of the discussion, he said, "You're the first person that's talked to me all day." Here this individual was, alone in the midst of a huge crowd, everyone turning their face away from the face of Christ in him.

But you and I are called to a new way of life. That's the true meaning of Resurrection. The Resurrection begins right now.

Let us pray.

Lord Christ, grant us the spirit to get behind you, to follow you when it is scary or unpopular, to love our neighbors in need, or the marginalized. Help us to stand with those whom culture deems losers, outcasts, deadbeats, or a threat. Help us, in short, to turn into the headwinds towards Jerusalem, as we follow you to your cross.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen.