

2nd SUNDAY IN LENT
February 25, 2018

Text: Mark 8:31-38

Theme: Followers of Christ

We are now in our second week of Lent. Once more I want to side-step the intense self-reflection we normally do in this season in order to continue our reflections on the true nature of God. Last week we experienced God through Psalm 25. God is described for us as a wise teacher, the God of our salvation, and the one who is over-flowing with mercy and steadfast love. Good and upright is our Lord.

And some of us are now using the first verse of the psalm in our daily prayers: *To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.*

As we look at the lessons for this week we turn to *Mark* to learn more about God through his Son, Jesus Christ. Up to this point in the gospel, we encounter a very charismatic man who (as soon as he invites people to join his little huddle) they leave everything behind (including their families) and follow him immediately. These men have no idea what they signed up for, but they soon experience the benefits of hanging out with this amazing man.

His teachings are astounding.

He heals the sick, the troubled, and the disabled.

He tells parables and explains everything to them in private.

He feeds thousands of people with only a few scraps of food.

And he even walks on water.

This is certainly the kind of God that we can believe in and trust in and follow to the ends of the earth. Through his Son, Jesus Christ, we see God as our healer and our provider. He lifts up our souls every time we hear about another miracle. And even though the disciples must have grown a bit uncomfortable with the arguments Jesus has with the Pharisees, they also notice that Jesus quickly silences them with a single question. Christ has the upper hand. Clearly, he rules!

Jesus is demonstrating his real essence as the Son of God, and it must have been pure ecstasy to follow him from place to place and from one miracle to the next.

It is true that some thought him to be scandalous. It is also true that his purpose was not compelling or obvious to those whose hearts were hardened. Some were very suspicious of him and thought him to be crazy and in league with the devil. But for his disciples (his intimate group of men who saw him when he lay down at night and when he rose in the morning) they were all in! They saw the dramatic healings and witnessed the incredible miracles and experienced the way he included and welcomed everyone, and they only had eyes for Jesus.

This is God through Christ in all his glory.

But how many times have we been on this amazing high (with our lives neatly put together / with no indication that anything horrible is about to happen) when we get a phone call or a text message that absolutely turns our lives upside down and breaks our hearts wide open? No matter how faithful we are, it shakes us to the very core of our being when we experience the not-so-good news.

We heard the sound of hearts breaking in Parkland, Florida.

We heard them breaking in Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs.

We hear our own hearts tremble under the stress of an uncertain time.

And what we hear today are the hearts of his disciples breaking wide open to receive the chilling news that Jesus will be rejected, he will suffer greatly, and he will die on a cross. And even though that is so hard to hear, Jesus goes on to tell them that they (the ones who so readily dropped everything to follow him) must take up their cross and follow him. They must lose themselves for the sake of the gospel. And I hear the disciples respond –

Not what we signed up for!

Once more we sit here as post-Easter Christians. It would be so easy to dismiss the shock and revulsion we hear from Peter. We know how the story ends and it takes us back to a triumphant resurrection, a heavenly ascension, lavish gifts from the Holy Spirit, and a life of discipleship that rarely (for us) entails loss of life although let us not forget our brothers and sisters in Christ in at least forty nations around the world who face harassment, arrest, torture, and even death for boldly proclaiming Christ.

In the Gospel of Mark it is absolutely brilliant to hear this kind of news on the heels of Jesus asking the question ...

But who do you say that I am?

This declaration of what will soon unfold for Jesus defines God just as much as all those other adjectives we use for him. You see, we are just like Peter. We want and need a strong God who can come and destroy the evil of this world like Jesus did when he cast out all those demons. When the crushing weight of suffering bears down on us, when the voices of teenagers cry out to us, when we face one disappointment after another, we want and need a strong God to avenge our hurts, to right the wrongs in this world, and to put us back on safe ground.

But it is precisely when we are down and out that we begin to understand the God of might and strength and justice. What we learn about God today is that his strength is not measured in terms of some super-power force that comes swooping down to earth when needed, but it is measured in terms of his sacrificial love. His victory is not won by charging into the world with a mighty heavenly army, but it is won when he makes himself vulnerable on the cross.

The heart of Peter breaks today because he does not get the God he wants. Peter places Jesus, the Son of God, in a neat little box that is filled with stories of healings and exorcisms and miracles. But to know God in Christ, we need to know him in the suffering, too.

Once again we hear some of the same message we heard in Psalm 25:

God does not conform to our human expectations and desires.

God will be found in the uncertainty of life.

God will be discovered in the suffering we experience.

Jesus asks us:

Who do you say that I am?

Let us boldly answer the question the same way Peter did:

You are the Messiah!

And then let us just as boldly proclaim the God of glory and the suffering God as the one true God.

They cannot be separated.

They are not two entities.

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust. Amen