

This is the second service for our Lent series: Reality Road. Jesus is taking us down the road to Jerusalem and on the way, he's going to open our eyes to reality. Reality about his mission, his identity, and our place in God's universe.

We have a great passage for this evening, but I think it needs a disclaimer. If I was assembling the Gospel of Mark, I would put in a small insert. And here's how the passage would read:

"They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, [SPOILER ALERT] "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him."

Obviously, Jesus isn't concerned about spoilers; he wants his disciples prepared for what will happen in the end. But it's hard to imagine what was going through the disciple's mind as Jesus reveals where this road is leading. This wasn't the first time they had heard this either. The first time, they react how you might expect. They're surprised, they're indignant, they're in denial.

But this time, they're silent. They don't understand but they're too afraid to ask. What is it that they don't understand? The words and concepts of the sentence are straight forward, I don't think a dictionary is what the disciples need. No, they understood that Jesus is predicting his death and resurrection, they just don't understand why. They've seen Jesus cast out demons, walk on water, calm storms, and heal any disease or condition. And on top of it all, Jesus is the Messiah, God would never let this happen to his Chosen One. "Jesus, why would you let this happen, why would God let this happen to you?"

“Why?” is the question, but the question is never asked. Mark tells us that the disciples were afraid. Maybe they’re afraid of looking bad. The first time Jesus told them about his death, Peter confronts Jesus, tells him it will never happen, but Jesus fires back, “Get behind Satan, you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man”. Ouch. I don’t know what Jesus means, but I better not say anything.

Maybe, they’re not afraid of looking bad, but fear of what might happen to them. If this road leads to Jesus’ death, where does it lead for his followers?

Maybe they just couldn’t bear to hear any more. The disciples have seen great things as Jesus’ closest friends. They’ve grown to love Jesus, their Lord and friend. They’ve got a good thing going and they don’t even want to think about Jesus’ prediction coming true.

Mark doesn’t tell us exactly what the disciples were afraid of, but the result is clear. Because of their fear, the disciples don’t engage with Jesus. They don’t ask, they don’t want to learn more. Because of their fear, the disciples keep Jesus at arms distance. There’s no pandemic, but they still want to keep Jesus six feet apart.

Tonight, I want to consider how and why we might keep Jesus at arms distance as well. Sometimes, like the disciples, we’re comfortable with the way things are. We might be comfortable with the way that life’s going: We enjoy the place we live, the people we associate with, the way we spend our time and money. If we orient our lives around Jesus our family, friends, and neighbors might think we’re crazy religious fanatics. They might think we’re unintelligent, we’re so in denial about reality that we need religion to cope. We get nervous that following Jesus too closely might lead us away from the life we are comfortable in.

Maybe we keep Jesus at arm's length because he seems safest there. Obviously, to reject Jesus completely is not safe, that would leave us under the wrath of God. But to commit our entire life to Jesus, to try and follow him as closely as we can, that doesn't seem safe either.

If we do that, we might have to acknowledge our pet sin that has been plaguing our life for years. We might have to admit that we have deep flaws in our personality, and that it might be who we are, but that doesn't make it alright. We might have to disagree with our political party on a few issues from time to time. We might have to apologize to some people, we might have to forgive some people as well. It's simply not safe to follow Jesus too closely, so we keep him at arm's length. While the disciples often seem shockingly dense, it seems like we would've sat silently beside them.

As we've been walking through the gospel of Mark it's become clear that the disciples don't really understand Jesus, and in our reading today they're too afraid to learn more. Maybe they're comfortable where they're at, maybe they're afraid of the consequences, either way, they keep Jesus at arm's length. Amazingly, after two and a half years of being discipled by Jesus the disciples don't seem all that different from when they started.

Typically, if students did not improve after 2.5 years, we might fault the teacher, but in this case we know better. The problem is not that the disciples had a faulty teacher but that they themselves were faulty. Their human reason, twisted by sin, cannot understand the things of God. They can't comprehend that the Son of God, the chosen Messiah, would give up his life. The great irony is that sin is what causes the disciples to misunderstand Jesus, sin is what keeps them from asking for clarification, and sin is the answer to the question they should've asked:

Why would Jesus allow himself to be killed? To receive the full consequence of sin and restore the relationship between God and his creation. Jesus died for the sin of the world, for his fearful disciples, for timid disciples like you and me. It's because of the death that he foretells in our reading that your sins are forgiven, even your sin of keeping Jesus at arm's length, even your sin of lackluster discipleship. It is all covered by his blood.

Where does that leave us today?

First, let's be clear, the concerns of the disciples were fair. The concerns you might have in following Jesus are fair as well. After all, while the disciples dreamed of crowns, the reality is that Jesus is leading the disciples to a cross. And so, if they were afraid of witnessing the horrific death of their friend, they were justified in it. If they were afraid of what might happen to them, well they may not have died with Jesus but eventually nearly every one of them was killed for their association with Jesus. If they were afraid that Jesus' kingdom was not what they had in mind they were absolutely right.

Jesus didn't remove the things that brought the disciples fear. But even in our passage today, he gives them hope beyond fear. They don't understand, but in Jesus' frightening announcement is a reason for hope, verse 31: "And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." It's not that they shouldn't have been afraid, crucifixions and death are frightening things, but God's salvation for his Son and for his people gives hope stronger than our fear. The resurrection is a promise sweeter than the bitterness of death.

This is true for the disciples and it's true for us. If you're concerned that following Jesus on the road will disrupt your comfortable mode of living, you're probably right. If you're

concerned that you might need to alter the way you spend your time and money, you're probably right. Going down the road with Jesus is going to be difficult in many ways but it is worth it. It's worth it today, and in the glorious day of our Lord's return when we experience the resurrection that he did, just as he foretold.

Following Jesus will lead us to different people, places, and opportunities to serve God. But let's spend time this Lenten season considering how we might train and live as disciples of Christ. I'll close with a quote from Luther, "I know not the way God leads me, but well do I know my guide." In following Jesus, I suspect we focus too much on figuring out where his road leads. Instead, deepen your love and trust for your guide and trust him to take care of the navigation. Praise be to Jesus Christ, who guides us through this life and into the next. Amen.