

“From the Divine to the Diabolic”

The Gospel of Mark has always been one of my favorites. I like its simplicity and its breathless movement. Again and again the words “immediately”, “right then”, and “next” appear. It’s like the telling of a tale in the excited voice of a child: *“Then he went there, and immediately the people did this and after that we all went on, and next Jesus said this and right away we all got into a boat.”* The story breathes; it is ALIVE. It draws you in.

Let’s consider our Gospel passage for today, which comes from Mark’s gospel. Let’s enter into the story, moving with the people, with Jesus and his followers.

Mark’s gospel presents a “journeying” motif. At this point in the journey Jesus is about to take his disciples to a moment of revelation regarding his identity and future. They have witnessed incredible demonstrations of Christ’s power. He fed a crowd of more than 5,000 people with five barley loaves and two fish. He walked on water to the boat where his disciples looked on amazed and afraid. A bit later Jesus healed a Gentile girl and a man who was unable to hear or speak. Mark then describes another feeding miracle, where more than 4,000 people were fed with seven loaves of bread. Then he heals a blind man, fully restoring his sight.

At this point the disciples were thrilled, amazed, excited, anticipating a success story beyond all their hopes and dreams—for their people, their nation, and for themselves.

It’s no big surprise that when Jesus gets them alone and asks them, “Who do people say that I am?” they have several immediate flattering replies. It’s clear that the disciples had been listening to the excited conversations among the crowds. They list three possibilities that had to have been circulating: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the other prophets. All three represent powerful God-inspired voices.

But then Jesus changes his demeanor, looks at them directly, and asks, “Who do YOU say that I am?”

Peter answers without hesitation.

Before we consider his answer, let's think a moment about Peter. It's fun to ask fellow Christians sometimes, "Who do you identify with the most in the Bible?" Many, many people answer "Peter".

Although Peter ultimately became the ROCK on which the church was built, he reached the end of Christ's earthly ministry a broken man. Peter LOVED Jesus, that's easy to see. He wore his heart on his sleeve. He was impulsive, which at times got him into trouble and at other times helped him make great leaps of faith. He literally leapt out of a boat on the Sea of Galilee, to walk to Jesus on a stormy sea. He always meant well, declaring he would defend Jesus from his opponents—even to the death if necessary.

But, oh, Peter was a flawed human being. He sank into the sea as he tried to walk to Jesus and cried out for rescue. He hid in fear and lied several times in order to protect his own life after Jesus' arrest.

Peter is one "hero" of the Bible that we can see was just like us—a real person with strengths and failings. SEEING OURSELVES IN PETER CAN BE A GOOD THING- HELPING US LEARN FROM HIS STRUGGLES AND MISTAKES.

Let's return to Peter and Jesus in conversation. Jesus asks his friends, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter replies without hesitation: "the Messiah", which in Greek is "the Christ", both meaning "the Anointed One" of God. Peter believes that Jesus is the One awaited for centuries, the One who will rule over his people as God himself among them, the One who will build a realm of peace and plenty, of truth and justice, the One who will rule forever, "whose kingdom will have no end."

Jesus affirms that Peter's words are true, but cautions the disciples not to talk of this publicly. THEN Jesus STUNS them by describing what being the Messiah will entail: he will be rejected, undergo great suffering, he will be killed and rise again. Peter grabs him, pulls him aside and says something like: "What are you talking about? This is nuts!" He "rebukes" Jesus.

Then, of course, Jesus rebukes Peter, saying, "Get out of here, Satan! You're taking the human point of view, not God's."

This is a powerful story. It portrays Mark's journey theme, because here at this point, the journey moves towards the cross. No matter how his friends pull against him, Jesus pushes on, towards suffering and death.

What can we learn from this story in Mark?

First, **we have the astounding ability to see and recognize the divine in our midst.** Peter did. Friends, we can do what Peter did. We can see God in the everyday world. Wherever God's will is done, we discern God's presence. Where the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the wounded are made whole, those sinking in life's storms are lifted—where this is happening, God is present.

God **made us** with the ability to discern his presence. The Holy Spirit is revealing God in our midst all the time: through nature, in our thoughts and insights, in people we encounter. We need to learn to “trust our gut” when this happens. That's a kind of leap of faith—and one that Peter took to speak the bold words he said to Jesus: ***You are the Messiah.*** It was radical for Peter to speak those words aloud.

The second learning from this story is that **we can just as easily spout the words of Satan, words that are diabolic.** Peter did. Like Peter, we believe that any paths that lead to suffering are not God's will. God would never call us to travel that road, we think. The voices that tell us to avoid suffering at any cost are not divine voices but diabolic voices.

Think of ways we might recoil from something God is calling us to embrace, because it will be difficult, it will be painful, we might suffer:

Vast numbers of children need foster homes, and few people are willing to embrace the challenges required to open their lives and homes to a child in need.

A serious boyfriend or girlfriend is in a car accident that results in paralysis—talk of marriage had been serious, but now the possibility of a shared future is painted with hues of suffering.

Your work environment is filled with hostility; a co-worker is being treated unfairly, but to advocate for this friend might result in the loss of your job in an economy that is struggling.

A neighbor's home was devastated by an accidental fire. The family of seven is in serious trouble, but your own family has little to spare—reaching out to help will require belt-tightening and significant changes in your lifestyle.

So—the Gospel teaches us:

We all have the astounding ability to see and recognize the divine in our midst,

AND we can just as easily speak words and embrace actions that are diabolic.

The third learning is this: we can swing back and forth between these two really quickly! Peter did.

Be on guard! We need to know these truths about ourselves.

One final point: It is stupid and pointless to listen to the diabolic voice that murmurs, “You don't have to suffer...” BECAUSE NO MATTER WHAT WE DO IN LIFE WE WILL. We will suffer. It is built into life. Life contains suffering NO MATTER WHAT. Satan has been called The Prince of Lies for a reason.

Our task is to choose what we will suffer FOR, and how we will handle suffering. God will help us choose. God will help us be faithful in choosing the right paths, no matter where they lead. He went with Jesus to the cross and BEYOND. He went with Jesus to the tomb and BEYOND. He journeys with us, too, and always will be with us----- forevermore! This is the great good news of all time. Amen.