

Sermon Feb 28, 2021
Redeemer, Ramsey
Pastor Michael Linderman

Grace, Mercy and Peace, from God our creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man 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. ³² He said all this quite openly.”

How are we to understand the reason for and meaning of our Lord’s death, and how can it help us in our mission as his disciples in the world today? These are central questions for you, dear church, especially for any fellowship that, despite all its faults, wants to be relevant, and vital, and Spirit-led in its own historical time and context. You want to know where your Lenten Journey is leading you. And you know from having done this journey before, you cannot just skip to Easter. You must first travel to the foot of the cross of Christ on Golgatha’s hill.

Our Gospel lesson today is helpful in this regard, and I owe the inspiration of this interpretation to Professor Ira Brent Driggers, Associate Dean of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir-Rhyne University, in Columbia South Carolina. I read his commentary on our Gospel lesson this past week, on the Working Preacher website, and it is striking in its clarity.

Mark shows us that Jesus rises to great renown because of his healing and teaching. Crowds have started to follow him, hoping to witness and benefit from his healing. And his teaching has started to cause furrowed brows among the elite of the Jewish religious establishment. Driggers points out that Jesus has been “unflinching in his insistence that the divine mission to welcome and reconcile sinners overrides the stigma of associating with them.” The religious establishment, however, cannot abide this mission emphasis.

Jesus’ disciples have come to expect incredible things, because they have seen first-hand what he can do. They have witnessed how he heals people, how he commands demons and the forces of nature. They have witnessed how he bests his detractors in debate. From the disciples’ point of view, the sky is the limit, as

far as Jesus' future is concerned, and they now see their association with Jesus as unprecedented. They are in the intimate company of the messiah of Israel! They find themselves at the heart and center of what God has promised for centuries to do for his people. To match their enthusiasm, they have started to imagine how their association with Jesus might bring them earthly glory too.

But here in chapter 8 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus shuts down any theologies of glory that are taking root in their hearts. For all of the sudden he announces that "the Son of Man 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."

Wait, what did he just say? No, this can't be. How can the messiah of Israel, God's chosen and anointed, who acts effortlessly with such transformational power, be killed, by anybody? How is that possible? And why would it be the path of the messiah of Israel to take? Why would Jesus be as open to such an inglorious death as he seems to be?

This abrupt shift in the narrative of Mark's Gospel is very important for interpreting Jesus' view of his mission. Despite the fact that he commands such unusual power in healing and teaching, Jesus is resigning himself to death, and then talking about being raised from the dead on the third day. And he is not fooling around with this prediction. In our lesson today, when Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for saying this, Jesus rebukes him and calls him Satan! That may seem over the top, but we are to understand that Jesus is very clear about his view of things.

Driggers' commentary on this lesson focuses our attention on the "must" of Jesus' prediction, that the Son of Man **MUST** undergo great suffering, and so on. There are various views of Jesus death as necessary for our salvation that are alive and well in the theology of the church, which seem to be supported by various passages from the Bible. The most common views are that God ordained Jesus' suffering and death, either as payment for the sin of humanity, or because Jesus' suffering and death is the heavenly substitute for our own that somehow satisfies a righteous, and wrathful God. But Mark does not provide a clear interpretation of Jesus' death, and his narrative points to a simpler reason for it. Jesus "must" die, not because God has ordered it, but because rejection and death are the

logical consequences of his unwavering focus on the healing, forgiveness and reconciliation of those who are downtrodden and outcaste.

Driggers writes, "Jesus dies because powerful humans oppose both his healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption that mission brings to established law and order. Unbeknownst to Jesus' opponents, they are opposing the in-breaking reign ("kingdom") of God."

And here is the kernel of truth in the gospel that lights our way today in the life of the church. Instead of pinning Jesus' death on a wrathful God, or some heavenly calculus that demands Jesus' ransom for the many, Mark's Gospel gives us his death as a simple consequence of his unrelenting mission to the downtrodden and outcast. To push the issue as far as Jesus did, and insist as he did on the intrinsic acceptability of the outcast and the intrinsic dignity and justice of the cause of the oppressed is to invite the rebuke of those interested in the status quo.

And this is a truth we see wherever the church is unrelenting and courageous in its mission to follow the focus of Jesus. When you survey the many contexts that the church must operate in and find such an imbalance of power, there you will see which direction the church should lean in its vision for mission. In the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, the kingdom of God has come near for those who have been pushed to the side in the kingdoms of the earth. When the Kingdom of God comes near, the first will be last, and the last will be first.

One example of how such an imbalance of power affected the church's mission is how Jesus' focus on the downtrodden and outcast spurred the growth of the Lutheran mission in south India starting in the 18th century. Jesuit missionaries had already been working there when the first Lutheran pastor, Bartholomeus Ziegenbalg first stepped foot on the sand on the south east coast of India in 1706. Ziegenbalg traveled from Germany and set to work learning the local language, called Tamil, and soon began to translate the Gospels into Tamil. He studied Hinduism, the dominant religion there, and planned to begin his mission among the high-caste Brahmins in the area, just like the Jesuits had done. The strategy was to make inroads among the high-caste groups, and the rest of society, including the low caste Dalit community, would follow and become Christian.

When Ziegenbalg pitted his Lutheran theology against the various brands of Hinduism that the upper castes practiced, he found they were hard to convert. But when the Dalit fisherman villages heard the preaching of the Gospel, when they heard how Jesus healed all who came to him, how he ate with outcasts and sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors, and when they saw how the religious elite and the powerful worked to shut Jesus down, they saw their own lives reflected in that Gospel, and their own salvation at hand, and they responded in droves. The Lutheran church in that area of south India became by and large a Dalit communion, made up of the fisher folk whose outcast standing in the local society forced them to live on the margins, literally situating their villages on the edge of the shoreline. To this day, the Lutheran churches of south India are made up of the ancestors of these low caste groups, and their theology of liberation, called Dalit Theology, echoes clearly in the world Christian communion as a theology of liberation that all people can learn from.

Indeed, now we can see how it is true that Jesus' death can bring life. There are people in the world today who see Jesus' life and death as proof that God understands their plight. They see their lives mirrored in the status of those outcasts at Jesus' feet. They hear the voice of their detractors echoed in the clamor and slander of Jesus' enemies. And they see their redemption in his glorious resurrection from the dead on Easter morning. Since Jesus stands by them in their plight, they find power in the Holy Spirit to stand for Jesus in their lives. Understanding how the Gospel works in this way, we can glimpse why the church in our situation continually affirms the positions it does with regard to racial, social and economic justice. It's because that's where the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings life out of death.

And even for you and me, who suffer little by comparison, those for whom the lines in life have fallen in pleasant places, even we can find healing, forgiveness, and life-giving power if we humble ourselves in the face of the utterly human but divinely powerful meekness of the king of heaven. This is the life that Jesus' death brings, and it is the life of Christ born in us by the Holy spirit that takes us step by step along our Lenten journey. May our journey be blessed, and may the warmth of Easter's sunrise shine on us all alike.

And may the peace of god , which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus amen.