

SERMON,
September 15, 2024
The Path of Great Resistance
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Mark 8: 27-38

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 116:1-9

James 3:1-12

Jesus is changing direction. He began his ministry by 'bringing good news to the poor' and by 'healing the children of Israel'. But now he's changing direction after meeting and being bested by that gentile, the Syrophenician woman, then healing the deaf and dumb man, feeding of the 4,000 and finally healing the blind man in Bethsaida. Today's scripture is the culmination of a series of stories about Jesus' ministry 'on the other side' ... across the great boundary between Israel and the gentiles.

We need to take a minute to get a handle on how great that space is between the Israelites and the gentiles. I've always been lulled a bit by the sound of that word ... "gentile" ... it sounds rather 'gentle, I think' but it is, for the people of Jesus, far from 'gentle'. Gentiles oppressed, dominated and enslaved the people of Jesus for centuries as these Israelites and the Judeans struggle to maintain the identity with which Abraham had been entrusted. A reminder for us of the true relationship between the people of Jesus and gentiles.

First there was enslavement by the Egyptians for about 400 years. Then very briefly, there was a period of self-rule under King David and Solomon. Then, however the domination and oppression continued with the Assyrians, then the Babylonians who were subsequently defeated by the Persians in about 539 bce. Then the Greeks from about 333-63 BCE and then the Romans until what we call the time of Jesus. So, for about six hundred years, Jesus' people were enslaved, oppressed and dominated by just about everybody in the middle east. Except for the time under the Persians, these eras were marked with martyrdoms and murders, enslavement and attempts to eradicate the identity of the Yahwists. The people wanted a Messiah like David, The Warrior Anointed one that was their Saviour. By the way, that is where the 'Saviour' addiction to the word Messiah that actually means 'anointed' emerged. "King David, the warrior Saviour is what we need to free us!"

So, now in our story, Jesus is headed to the super gentile territory of Caesarea Philippi to embark on this new direction, the direction that he was handed by his encounter with the 'enemy .. the Syrophenician woman'. Caesarea Philippi was in the very north right on the border between Northern Galilee and Syria, in gentile territory. Caesarea Philippi was recently renamed by Herod the Great's son Philip, honour or Caesar Augustus. A temple to Augustus accompanied the renaming, rebuilding and glorification of the city. It was about this city and surrounding territory and the legacy of the Romans that Virgil wrote: "their empire would know no bounds, nor periods, dominion without end". It was outside of this Roman stronghold that Jesus was now ready to change direction. His orders from God were to head straight at the Romans and forgive. I think we have become so familiar with the word Gentile that we often forget what this meant to Jesus.

I think we forget, but Jesus certainly didn't forget, that these gentiles, the Roman occupiers, were in the habit of torturing and executing those that dared to defy their empire. Jesus was about to defy the empire.

It was here that Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah (after all here they were on the edge of the Roman world ... Caesarea Philippi ... of course Peter thought "HERE WE GO ... light this place on fire, Messiah Jesus"; here that Jesus said, 'don't tell anyone that, Peter', and here that Jesus predicted his death for the first time.

The conflict between all these Gentiles and the people of Jesus was ‘the major issue for the people of the time. Remember, Mark’s listeners, have just experienced another terrifying oppression by the Romans ... thousands of Judeans murdered, and the temple destroyed.

However, God sent “Jesus” ... Absolutely the Messiah, the saviour, but not at all recognizable to either the Judeans or the oppressors.

Jesus thought he had come to offer solace to the ‘the children of Israel’, to bring good news to the poor. He thought he was sent to inspire his people, the people that knew him as a rabbi, a teacher.

Then, he ran into that gentile, that Syrophoenician woman. She wasn’t supposed to be there and she sure wasn’t supposed to show Jesus what God really wanted of him.

Jesus slowly realizes that his new mission was to heal the WHOLE WORLD. This meant reaching out across boundaries and taking consequences, of pursuing a vision of the Kingdom of God as a universal kingdom that brings together people who are enemies ... real enemies, enemies for more than six hundred years

Then, Jesus turns to the crowd and says, “deny yourselves and take up your cross to 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.”

No, it surely wasn’t going to be easy, but it was the only way to create peace ... to create the kind of peace that could last, the kind of peace to create the Kingdom of God on earth.

This new direction was going to be difficult; not only would it be misunderstood by the “those who are ashamed of Jesus and of his words in this adulterous and sinful generation”, but most certainly, bringing the word of God to the Romans and not worshipping Caesar, was going to be very, very dangerous.

My question for us today, is, “Why in the name of all that’s holy would Jesus do this?”

After all, we know Jesus as fully divine, but also fully human with all the human frailties of fear and anxiety and second guessing and rage and vengeance to overcome.

Why? Because Jesus knows from his Prophet Isaiah:

The LORD God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I did not turn backward.

Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the LORD God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

PAUSE

A friend of Pat’s and mine shared this prayer with us recently. It’ reminds me of what Jesus might have been feeling and living at this particular moment when the only sure thing for him was his relationship with God.

It is entitled a *Prayer of Sir Francis Drake*. It was probably not actually from Sir Francis Drake, however, it does fit the sentiment that a man about to take his disciples on a terrifying adventure, to make the world a better place, might have had on his heart ...

What does it look like and feel like when we have to follow God's big idea for humanity? What can it be like in our lives when we are faced with a frightening 'opportunity'. Let's be thinking of what Jesus overcame to follow his God ...

THE PRAYER ...

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

1. Do we settle for the self-satisfying dream come true? Or is it possible to know that we will die and be dust, God's dream not fulfilled, but we took a wholehearted run at it, with all our God-given might.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

2. Have we allowed our efforts to build a new earth to dim our vision of God's new heaven? Is it possible for us to follow Jesus into Caesarea Philippi, the stronghold of our enemy and forgive, forgive, forgive? Even with all of our friends screaming "Stop being a fool, take care of yourself, get away from those horrible people!" Is it possible?

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery,
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.

3. What does this disturbance look like? When we are on the wider seas, and we've lost sight of land? Is this what Jesus felt in his 'new direction'?

Maybe this feels like applying for law school when we're wrapping up a successful undergrad degree? Where is the landing place that makes us feel comfortable? God's strength is our 'landing place'.

Maybe this feels like facing that diagnosis of cancer. Where is the landing place that makes us feel comfortable? God's strength is our 'landing place'.

Maybe this feels like facing retirement without the money we thought we'd have by now? Where is the landing place that makes us feel comfortable? God's strength is our 'landing place'.

The Prophet Isaiah says, "It is the LORD God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?"

Is that Peter's words telling us to stay safe and not put ourselves in danger? Is that Peter's words of caution, when we are faced with our biggest challenges, somebody says, "that's just too much for you". When we need support and to focus on our real strength, can we, like James describes "With our tongue we both bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse ourselves." Yes to all these arenas of self doubt, but James assures us that we are made in the likeness of God.

Made in the likeness of God ... that is an amazing honour, and an amazing responsibility, isn't it? Let's get clear, my wonderful people. We, made in the likeness of God, have the ability create God's Kingdom on earth because God is our strength and our landing place. It is the LORD God who helps me; what could possibly get in my way.

In the name of all that's holy.... AMEN.

We sing together our hymn of response to the word of God. **#634** *Will you come and follow me*