



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

8. March, 2009. Lent 2

Title: "Listen Up . . . Listen Carefully"

Text: St. Mark 8:31-38

J.J.

Today's Gospel reading is a major turning point in the Gospel of Mark. Of the sixteen chapters in this Gospel, the first eight focus on Jesus' Galilean ministry, as Kathy+ spoke about last Sunday, stories about Jesus calling the disciples, healing the man with the unclean spirit, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and many who were sick with various diseases, the healing of a leper, a paralytic and the man with a withered hand. And then there was Jesus' preaching ministry throughout Galilee, his wonderful parables, and his insightful teachings. There was the stilling of the storm and the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac (which ticked off all the pig farmers in the area). A young girl is restored to life and a woman healed of her bleeding problem which she had had for 12 years. Then there was the feeding of the five thousand, and later on, the feeding of the four thousand, and the story of Jesus walking on the water . . . and then, suddenly, it all comes to an abrupt ending, right here in Chapter 8, and the focus is now on Jesus' going up to Jerusalem and the cross.

Just before today's reading, we have that wonderful confession by Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, but in this Gospel, unlike in Matthew's Gospel, in Mark's Gospel Peter's confession gets little attention, with Jesus sternly ordered Peter and the other disciples not to tell anyone about him. And then, we hear that Jesus 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. From that moment on things would never be the same. Up until this point, Jesus' followers were constantly being challenged to understand the remarkable power of Jesus—How does he do what he does? What is the source of His power? But from now on the challenge will be different as the disciples wrestle with Jesus' prediction about suffering and death. How can that be, they wonder? How can that be that this One, who has all the power of God evident in His life, how can it be that he is going to suffer and to die? And they are puzzled. Because we already know the end of the story, we tend to jump ahead to the resurrection, but the disciples didn't know that. They had to struggle and grapple with, the tough question: How can that be that the One who they now viewed as the promised Messiah, how can it be that he is going to suffer and to die? What is God up to, anyway?

As is frequently the case in the Gospels, Peter gives voice to what the others were likely thinking. Peter is an interesting character. There are times when he acts without using any good judgment, like when he gets out of the boat, and suddenly realizes he's walking on water. Or, he often speaks without thinking, like at the Transfiguration, when he tells everyone he wants to build three monuments to remember the occasion. And, he is going to do more things like that, like grabbing his sword when surrounded by soldiers at Gethsemane—not a smart thing to do, Peter—or, again, denying Jesus three times when confronted by the high priest's servant girl. There are times when I really get upset with Peter, but not in today's reading. I think Peter really gets a bad wrap. Note what happens: Jesus tells the disciples he's going to suffer and to die . . . and he says that openly, like within earshot of the very ones who wanted to get rid of him . . . and Peter, Peter in his very best form, just wants to protect his friend, and so he takes him aside, privately, in order to give him some good advise. Jesus, however (and notice what the text says), Jesus turns aside, looks at all the disciples and then publicly rebukes Peter. Now, I don't know about you, but I want to say: Wait a minute Jesus. That's not fair! Peter is only trying to help out! Ah, but my having that thought, and now having said it, suddenly I have to realize that I am in the same boat with Peter . . . with the same mind set that is set not on divine things, that is, on the things of God, but on human things and on human ways of thinking and doing things. So, David (and I would also invite you): Listen Up . . . Listen Carefully.

As one reads and wrestles with this Word of God, it doesn't take long to realize, like the Prophet Isaiah, that God's ways are not our ways; God thoughts are higher than our thoughts. And it's important for all of us to hear that as we try to live out our daily lives in these troubled times, in our homes and with our families, at work and at play, in all that we do . . . and that is especially important for us here in this community we call St. James' during this interim time. These are not easy times in which we live, times of incredible change—globally, nationally, within our denomination, in our congregation, in our homes, in our families and in our personal lives. And it's important that we, together, through much prayer and study of Scripture, through intentional reflection and discernment, by engaging in good conversation with one another and mutual encouragement . . . it is important that we hear today's Gospel reading and set our minds on divine things, and not on human things. Now, how do we do that? Well, Jesus tells us: "If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." If you think you can save your own life . . . well, we're mistaken. We're going to loose it. But if you loose your life, says Jesus, if you loose your life in living out the Gospel—in loving God above all things and your neighbor as yourself—well, then, you will find life and you will have life abundant. That's what this Gospel reading is all about, and that's true, not only as we live out our daily lives with family, spouses, partners, significant others, children, parents, friends, and neighbors; but it's also true for us here at St. James', as we re-discover our Vision, our Mission, and our Ministry. So . . . Listen Up . . . Listen Carefully. Amen.

S.D.G.

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