

Mark 8:27-38

Lent 2B + February 28, 2021
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Unexpected Life

Grace to and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Jesus zigs while the world zags. He keeps doing and saying unexpected things in a way that makes Him stand out.

He's not like a celebrity who tries to be outrageous by pushing the boundaries further than the last outrageous celebrity: He's certainly not trying to make a name for Himself by driving the culture further into the sewer. Instead, He's been given a name that means, "Yahweh saves," and He's been going about showing how much authority and power He has by using it to help people. For instance, in Mark 7 and 8, you find Jesus doing miracles left and right. He casts out a demon from a girl in a different zip code. He makes the blind see, the deaf hear and the mute speak. He feeds a multitude with a few loaves of bread and a few small fish. He couldn't make it plainer that He's fulfilling prophecies, like one of my all-time favorites from Isaiah 35: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." (Isaiah 35:5-6) When will these things take place, says Isaiah? When the Messiah comes: actually, when God Himself comes to save.

That's all rather unexpected: after all, you don't normally have God in the flesh walking around and healing people on the spot and performing all sorts of other miracles. It's good to see that the disciples are catching on: Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?", and they report that people say that He might be John the Baptist, Elijah or another of the prophets; and that's a little funny because while they're willing to think that He might be a man of God back from the dead, it's totally out of the question a couple verses later that Jesus could rise from the dead. In this case, though, the disciples are ahead of the general public: when Jesus asks, "But who do you say that I am?", Peter nails when he says, "You are the Christ." He's been following Jesus for a while, listening to His words and watching the wonders, holding it all up against the Old Testament, and he makes the obvious conclusion. This Jesus is the Messiah they've been waiting for.

So what is this Jesus, the Messiah, going to do? The unexpected.

First off, He tells His disciples to tell no one that He is the Christ, which seems like a really counterproductive method of gaining a following. This is called the "messianic secret," that the Messiah doesn't want to be known, and there are all sorts of debates about why Jesus tells His disciples to keep it on the down-low. However, the simplest reason for it is that the Messiah is going to do the most unexpected thing, the thing that messiahs don't do if they're messiahs: He's going to suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed. He's also going rise again after three days, but that part seems lost on the disciples.

Among great marketing slogans of history, you will not find, "Follow Me because I'm going to be killed;" and in this case, it's, "Follow Me because I'm going to be rejected and killed when I refuse to use the power I have to turn My enemies into a pile of smoldering ashes," which makes it even worse. Jesus says that not only is He going to die, but He's going to die willingly. He's planning on it.

You can understand, then, why Peter pulls Him aside to set Him straight: if this is a test, it's a bad one – and if this is a joke, it's not funny. Messiahs simply don't announce defeat when they're barely getting started. In Peter's mind, the Christ has just said the most unchrist-like thing! He wants to put a stop to this right away, either because he's upset, or he's knows a loser publicity campaign when he sees

one, or just because it doesn't make sense. And what does Peter get for helping this young Messiah with His messaging? A gut-punch rebuke: "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

Sounds a little harsh. But ... you just heard Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness last week, and all of the devil's temptations came down to one: be the Messiah without the suffering and death, and go straight to the power and the glory. That's the same thing that Peter is saying here: Be the Christ, but don't die. It makes total sense coming out of Peter's mouth because he doesn't yet understand the gospel that the Messiah has come to save His people by taking their place, suffering for their sins and dying their death ... and rising again.

As a plan of salvation, that's totally unexpected. It's not how the world works, so it seems as if God is changing the rules. But this is important: God is not changing the rules. He's being who He always has been – loving to the point of sacrifice for those whom He has created. Although He gives His law because He is powerfully holy, He foremost interacts with sinners by being merciful. The reason that this seems ridiculous to sinners is not because it is or because it doesn't work, but because sinners just want the opposite of who God is. God says, "I act in mercy;" sinners respond, "We want a God who knocks heads together." God says, "I act towards you in grace," and sinners mutter that "We could use some law and order around here." God says, "Here's my law," and sinners moan, "What happened to the love?" God says, "I came that you might be one in Me," and the world says, "How divisive!"

The reason that Jesus' plan is unexpected is not because it's shameful or ill-fated, but because sinners will naturally resist whatever God plans. Even if the plan is that the Messiah suffer hell on a cross so they don't have to, they're going to say it's a bad plan and they want nothing of it.

Now, if sinners are going to get the Messiah's work wrong, they're also likely to get discipleship wrong. Normally, you follow the messiah who's going to make life better, easier, more prosperous and freer. But here's what Jesus says next:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, suffer, lose and don't be ashamed. As marketing slogans go, this one does not get five stars. Why would anybody follow Jesus? Why do you follow Jesus?

Because you know. By the grace of God, you know because you have come to believe.

"Deny yourself" sounds like a terrible sacrifice until you take a good look at who you are. You're the one who's constantly worried about who you are. You're constantly having to work hard to be patient, chaste, kind, attentive and courageous; and because that takes so much effort, you're constantly trying to justify this or that sin so that you're not quite as bad as you are. You're making bad choices all the time. You're the one lying awake at 2 in the morning because of something you've done, something you've lost or something you know you'll never be. All of that, by the way, is the fringe of the dread that you're a sinner who's going to die. Then Jesus comes along and says, "Deny yourself – don't be that anymore," and your first response is, "I don't want to give this all up! I'd rather stick with the sins, the worries, the sleepless nights and the grave."

Yours is not a good plan. When Jesus says, "Deny yourself," it's a call to repentance. It's to stop saying, "The best I can ever be is a disappointing, dying sinner." It's to start saying, "In Christ, I am a new creation."

"Take up your cross and follow Me" also lacks appeal until you take a closer look. It does mean that you'll face suffering and opposition in the world: if you follow the Messiah who suffered, you should expect nothing else. But then again, everybody has trouble and suffering whether they follow Jesus or not. Specifically, you'll suffer opposition for a reason because you follow Jesus, and that opposition is growing. It's a cross to bear. But bearing it isn't a matter of Jesus saying, "Since I suffered the cross for your salvation, you've got to suffer too!" It's that you know the truth that sinners naturally oppose: Jesus made His cross to be your cross so that you might have eternal life, and that's worth hanging on to. That's why our epistle can say that suffering produces hope because it is in the name of Christ. It doesn't make sense to the world, and the world will always try to frame the gospel as the opposite of good news: it will call sin freedom, it will call blindness vision, and it will say that Christianity is all about enslavement. It will be a cross to bear, but the outcome is eternal life.

Sadly, the world takes the next part as a threat – and sadly, many Christians see it as a painful obligation – when Jesus says to forfeit the world and gain your soul. The world really isn't worth gaining when it's falling apart and dying – gaining the world is like inheriting a luxury car with a great sound system... that's gone 300,000 miles, lacks a transmission and has a family of raccoons living in the back seat. Forfeiting the world means turning from sin and death – gaining your soul means being forgiven, and then the kingdom of heaven is yours. God wants this! God wants to give you the kingdom of heaven – it's why His message is a constant call to repent, to turn from death and live. Those who trust in Christ have all things, including eternal life, because Christ has all good things to give them. Those one who reject Christ have nothing because they've rejected the One who gives, and so they will be ashamed on the Last Day.

The ways of this Messiah are unexpected, but that is only because sinners have such terrible expectations. Come, my friends: in Christ, die to live. You already have in your baptism, so daily turn from this world and cling to the One who is risen from the dead. Receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Hear His Word and have your soul restored. Live as one set free from sin, knowing that in Christ, on the Last Day, God will not be ashamed of you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.