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***A More Positive Spin on Lent***  
***Mark 8:31-38***  
***February 28, 2021***

Lent used to be thought of as a Roman Catholic or Anglican or Lutheran practice. But over the past few decades it has found its way into our Presbyterian liturgy. My first experience of Ash Wednesday was in Vancouver Island thirty years ago. I was out there on a business trip and found my way to the Catholic cathedral in Victoria where the Ash Wednesday service was being held. It wasn't something I had ever run into as a Christian. But I really found it meaningful. It's really a central part of the Christian liturgy and sets us on course through Lent toward Holy Week. Today I ask us, what does Lent mean for you and me?

Jesus took his followers far north to Caesarea Philippi. Gail and I went on a tour to Israel in 2019 and we visited this site which is now called by the Arab name, Banias. What is significant about this particular place in Israel? Here, in 19BC, Herod built the temple of Augustus in honour of his emperor. As this photo shows, the temple sat right in front of a great cave, long thought to be the gateway into the underworld, the place where the Greek god Pan was alleged to live. The Greeks called this place Panias and they carved many shrines into the face of the high cliff that surrounds the origins of the Jordan river. In fact the cave was the centre for Hellenistic pagan worship. Animal sacrifices were thrown into the bottomless pool inside the cave. Here all the gods were worshipped: Zeus, Pan and the cult of the "dancing goats". This place was like an ancient Las Vegas; this is the reason that the rabbis forbade good Jews to go there. Is there any significance in the location where Jesus asks his disciples: ***who do people say that I am?***

Let me suggest that the location was not accidental. This is the place where we hear for the first time in Mark a statement on his coming passion. In fact, this is a pivotal point in Mark, the half-way point in the story. It is precisely in this place that we learn that Messiah will face suffering, death on a cross and resurrection. Right here at this opening to the underworld, before all the gods of Rome and Greece, Jesus, it would seem, challenges the forces of darkness. Right here in the face of the false gods of Rome and Greece, Jesus makes his claim of having power over the darkness.

And so, it is against this backdrop that Jesus asked the critical question: *who do people say I am?* Various answers were given. Then he asks the disciples, ***but who do you say I am?*** Peter boldly declares that Jesus is the Christ. What do you think Peter means by this? Here is what I think he is saying: ***I think you're the one who will purify our society, re-establish Israel's supremacy among the nations, and usher in a new era of peace and holiness. I'm expecting big things from you.***

At this point the crowd that are following him are brought into the picture. Mark wants us, the readers, also to be brought into the conversation. Jesus teaches them that he is heading toward Jerusalem where he will be rejected, suffer and be crucified and then resurrected. Three times in this Gospel Mark reiterates this teaching. This marks the turning point, from Jesus' teaching and preaching in Galilee, to his steadfast march toward Jerusalem. We should note also that each time Jesus raises the subject of the passion the disciples fail to grasp his message. Do we get it? Because it takes us to the heart of Lent and Easter as to what it means for us!

Peter's response affirms that all of them misunderstand what Messiah will be for Israel. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for his negative message. In response, Jesus rebukes Peter and told him he is on the side of the devil. Jesus says to all those gathered: ***If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.***

What does this mean for you and me? I suggest **first**, that Mark's audience would have heard this message very differently from us. Mark is writing his Gospel for many who are suffering under Nero's persecution in Rome. Death were constant companions for Christians in Rome. That's why they were hiding out in the catacombs! But throughout the empire the bottom eighty to ninety percent of the population lived under very dire conditions of poverty, disease and hunger, not to mention political oppression.

But, **second**, more than this his audience had a very different **understanding of self** from us. When Jesus says, **let them deny themselves**, they didn't think of the individual self as we do. For us it sounds like a call to self-sacrifice, or a denial of the individual self, or always to put oneself last. But Jesus' and Mark's first-century audience would have heard something entirely different. For they had little sense of individual identity as we do. Moreover, there was no need to emphasize gulping down suffering; most of them already did that as a way of life. To deny themselves and take up their cross meant for them a much more radical step. It meant a denial of their kinship group.

In modern Western post-Enlightenment societies, the basic unit of society is the individual self. In our culture, to renounce oneself means to renounce one's very individuality. In antiquity, however, and indeed in much of the world still today, the basic unit of society is not the individual person but the basic multi-generational kinship group. For us, therefore, to deny self means to renounce one's kinship unit.

Let me give us an example of what I'm getting at from one of my favourite Canadian crime writers, Peter Robinson. In his novel about D. I Banks, **Children of the Revolution**, Banks goes to question Joe Jarvis in connection with a current murder case he is working on. Jarvis was a coalminer in his early life. Life was hard down the pit. But Joe met the beautiful Ronnie where he learned the value of education. Through his reading a new world was opened up to him that changed him forever. Joe tells Banks that there is a price to be paid for personal growth and transformation. He says: **When someone like me, coming from where I come from, gets educated, he loses touch with his roots, he gets educated out of his class, and he leaves his culture behind...He can't**

***go back to what he left behind, and he isn't accepted anywhere else.***) Banks understands for he personally has made the same move. And by the way I personally experienced this!

Jesus' call, then, **if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,** is not a call to denial, but to a whole new way of being human. And for those who follow him, they see the world differently. Like Joe they have been transformed, but in an even more radical way; they have been transformed by God's Spirit to live within the Truth.

If this is what Jesus calls us to follow what does denial of self and cross bearing mean for us today? Let me suggest some of the ways the force and intent of Jesus summons might affect our modern lives.

Our cultural context is obviously very different from Mark's readers. We in Western society live under the persuasive influence of, not only ***materialism***, but also a culture of ***narcissism***. At so many levels of society, age or social/economic status, we are pulled into an obsession with self. Its presence is most obviously reflected in social media where we are constantly posing to the world about ourselves. How am I feeling? What's good for me? Inwardness is the new reality for western society today. Life seems to be curved in on us.

But Jesus asks us to deny that obsession. Indeed, he argues here that such an obsession only results in losing ourselves. Let's hear again what he said: **Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for? (the Message)**

Jesus teaches us here that it is only when I lose my self in the service to others and to the kingdom of God will I truly save my life. This is another example of the paradox of the Gospel: to remain fixated on ourselves is to lose something essential to our humanity and ends up being life-denying.

To take up my cross and follow Jesus stands directly antithetical to the prevailing philosophy. The choice to follow the way of the cross is not merely a personal choice I make. Taking up my cross means that

I have chosen to see all of life reflected through the prism of the biblical story. This is not merely personal choice; it is the truth that informs all humans who were created in God's image. And it means that I have a responsibility to share that truth with others.

I'm not suggesting that this is an easy step to take. Discipleship, following Jesus demands sacrifice and discipline. After all there is a cross at the centre of this story! This was a symbol of execution Roman style. It was cruel, painful, and public! If we set out to produce an advertisement for discipleship this symbol would be a PR nightmare. Who would want to come under that demanding, life-denying metaphor of cross bearing? But the beauty is that, as Jesus said to the presence of darkness and idol worship in Caesarea Philippi, resurrection and life triumph over death. His resurrection confirms this truth!

***Amen***

This philosophy might sound progressive and sophisticated but it has had dire consequences. People we bump into are confused about life and are often at their wits ends trying to make sense of it. Many live in the shadowlands of despair and desperation. Christians have a role to play as salt and light in the darkness and confusion

Jesus speaks into our modern dilemmas with a power that shakes us to the core. If we are all influenced to some extent by our society's drift into meaninglessness, relativity, and mind-numbing materialism how are we to hear these challenging words of Jesus?

Let us engage this Gospel, become disciples, accept our servanthood as God's people in the world and be less afraid of the burden of truth and love we carry with us. Taking up our cross and denying self has to be balanced with Jesus promise of support and grace. ***Take my yoke upon you...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.(Matthew 11:29ff)***