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Mark 8:27-38

“I Will Rise”

As a pastor, you want kick-off Sunday to be special. You want everything to be perfect. After the summer, when people in New England stay away from worship in droves, you look forward to seeing church members that you haven't seen in a long time. One hopes to see visitors come through the doors. You anticipate the sanctuary being full of noisy children and hearing the choir sing.

Lastly, as a pastor, you want a Scripture reading that will set a great tone. Not all Scripture is great for preaching. You want something meaty, a reading you can get excited about yourself. This kick off Sunday is special, but it's not exactly what I envisioned back in June when all the pandemic restrictions were being lifted. I pictured, at the least, being able to see all your smiling faces.

However, we did get a great Scripture reading. Jesus asked his followers, “Who do you say that I am?” That could be the most important question Jesus ever asked his disciples. It's a good question for us to consider as the church begins its new program year. This is his church. Whether we're conscious of it or not, pandemic or no pandemic, who Jesus is to us determines what we do and how we do it.

In the text, everyone seems to have a different answer to the question. Some said he was John the Baptist. Other said he was Elijah. Still others said he was one of the prophets of Israel. I'm not convinced Jesus was looking for one “right” answer. Peter offered an answer that was perfectly “correct.” Jesus is the Messiah – that word meaning the anointed one, the savior.

After Jesus tells Peter not to spread that around, he explains what will happen to him. Jesus said, “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.” To which Peter responded strongly. He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

I want to share something with you that I think Jesus understood, but Peter did not. Author Richard Rohr talks about this in one of his books. Rohr calls it “the pattern of spiritual transformation.” It's this idea that to grow toward union with God or enlightenment, we must move from a state of order to disorder and then lastly to a

reordering. I don't know why this seems to be God's way, but it appears that this is the shape of the spiritual journey: order, to disorder, to reorder.

Let me give you an example. What I consider to be the foundational story of the Jewish people is the Exodus. They went from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, but they didn't go directly from one to the other. They spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness: hungry, thirsty, suffering various ordeals, being tested. They couldn't avoid the wilderness. They didn't go around it. They didn't go over it. They had to go through it.

I'm betting that, if you look at your own life, you might see this pattern. Is there some stuff you had to go through that you would have given anything to avoid? In fact, there's a saying attributed to Robert Frost that says: "The only way out is through."

Peter wanted Jesus to avoid the wilderness of suffering, rejection and death. Who can blame him for thinking that the Messiah, the one God has anointed as the savior of the world, probably shouldn't die on a cross like a common criminal? Peter wanted a successful, unscarred, undefeated Messiah. But that's a human expectation. That's what Jesus called "setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Now, listen again to what Jesus said. He said, "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." Do you see where I'm going with this? Do you see the pattern?

Jesus said, "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." Peter got stuck on the idea that Jesus would suffer and die and the disorder that would follow. But Jesus went on to say, "I will rise again!"

That's a life-changing announcement! Yes, I'll suffer and die...but I will rise! That will change everything. He will conquer death itself. Everything that separates us from God, whether it's our sin or the powers of this world, will be overcome. Christ's church will spread throughout the world. There would be a glorious reordering of our relationship to God, but before that happened, there would be a time of disorder. Jesus couldn't go around it. He had to go through it.

After rebuking Peter, Jesus gathered the crowd and his disciples and said, "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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

I believe what he is saying here is that the movement from order to disorder and then to reorder applies to us as well. In other words, death has to occur in order for something new to be born. Sometimes the only way to the other side is through.

Are there things in your life that didn't work out as you imagined? Your ideally ordered universe got turned upside down. Your dad lost his job, forcing you to move to a new town where you knew no one. You dreaded going to school, because you got bullied every day. Your spouse died. You got cancer and suddenly, you'd give anything to live long enough to see your kids graduate high school. You failed an exam for a coveted certification.

In life, there is no escape from tragedy or trauma. There is no avoiding sickness or suffering. The promise of our faith is that those things don't get the last word. Richard Rohr says it this way, “Every religion, each in its own way, is talking about getting you to this reorder stage... It is the life on the other side of death, the victory on the other side of failure, the joy on the other side of the pains of childbirth. It is an insistence on going through – *not under, over, or around.*”

This weekend marks the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the aftermath, I remember thinking that, as a country, we had no idea how vulnerable we were. Along with the thousands of people who died that day, our sense of security died also.

There was a period of chaos and disorder, but then some interesting things happened. There were marvelous signs of appreciation for first responders who risk their lives to save others. Volunteers from all over the region made their way into New York. The level of cooperation was incredible.

At the time, the Reverend James Forbes was the pastor at the Riverside Church in New York City. I saw him interviewed on television. He said something that I've carried with me all these years. He said, “God doesn't bring about everything, but God can bring something out of everything.”

In other words, God doesn't cause all the tragedies in this world, but God can bring something life-affirming out of even the worst of situations, even death itself. The cross that stands before us is a reminder of that.

That brings me too today. We come to this kickoff Sunday and begin this new church year with the church in some degree of disorder. The pandemic has hit the church very hard, causing a lot of anxiety and adjustments. But there's a lot of people thinking maybe that's not such a bad thing. Maybe the church needed a wake-up call. Maybe it's good for us to struggle a bit, to be forced to think differently, and to try new things. Maybe some things in the church have to die in order for something new to be born.

I'm certain that this coming year will be full of joy and celebration. With things as they are, I'm certain it will also be full of struggle, uncertainty, and disappointment. But there's a saying that comes from the movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. It's pithy, but I think it has theological significance. It lines up with our faith. It says: "Everything will be alright in the end...if it's not alright then it's not yet the end."