

2 Lent YB 2024
Peter's Possession

Take up the Cross? How?
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Heeee's back! Last week, I told you that Satan would be back. Last week, as you may recall, Satan tempted Jesus in the desert. But Jesus went into the desert prepared by his baptism. The Spirit possessed him. This possession, unlike the general possessions in the Gospel of Mark, was not about fear or disease. To be possessed by the Spirit was to hear her speaking always in one's ear the message of baptism, "You are my beloved." Try as he will, Satan could not distract Jesus from this message, no matter how convincingly he wove his messages of fear and self-preservation. So, he left to reconnoiter. Today, Satan returns, and instead of trying to possess Jesus again, he turns to easier prey. Peter.

Today, we reach a pivotal time and place in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus leaves his ministry of healing and proclamation in Galilee. That is to say, Jesus leaves his fame, his power, and the safety he has accumulated with his exorcisms, healings and teachings. Next, he does something very strange. He goes north, way north, 25 miles north on foot to the city of Caesarea Philippi. Now why would he drag his disciples all the way there?

Caesarea Philippi sits at the base of Mt. Hermon; its snowmelt become the headwaters of the Jordan. This city is the center of the imperial cult. At the base of Mt. Hermon, there are the temples to the gods. The city was once called Panias, named after the nature god Pan. But Phillip, the son of Herod the Great, honored Emperor Augustus by renaming it Caesarea. (And, for good measure, he threw his own name in there, just to round it out.) With all the columns and marble and statues, for us, it would be like going to Washington D.C..

It is in the midst of its marble columns and statues of the gods that Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter looks at all the images of power around him. He's also seen power in Jesus in Galilee when he taught in the synagogues and cast out demons with power and authority. Peter declares the hope he's been harboring since the day he left his home to follow Jesus. He confesses, "You are the messiah!" You are the anointed one, the king!

When Jesus tells them not to tell anyone who he really is, their suspicions are confirmed. They are filled with joy. Their messianic hopes will finally come true. Israel shall be free from Rome! They have their king. But, Jesus begins to tell his disciples that as the messiah, he's going to suffer and be rejected by the religious powers. Then he will be crucified. And after he's dead, on the third day, he will rise again.

Jesus is the ultimate killjoy. What the hell is he talking about? He's already saying he's going to be a failed messiah. The Romans reserved crucifixion for thieves and rebels. And what do the Jewish religious leaders have to do with crucifixion? They can't order it; they don't have the power. And, that thing about rising from the dead—is he going to be a ghost and come back to haunt them?

Peter says to Jesus, "Hey, Jesus, come over here. I want to have a word with you."

"What is it, Peter?" asks Jesus.

"I rebuke the demon inside of you! Get out of Jesus!" To "rebuke" in the Gospel of Mark is to cast out a demon. Peter spits, throws salt, and does all the things he's seen in the movies. All the disciples watch on, wondering if Jesus is really possessed by Satan. For what devil words are these about being crucified? About rising from the dead like a ghost? God forbid!

Jesus quickly responds with his own rebuke of Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter is thrown to the ground; he rolls around wrestling with something unseen, till Satan leaves him. You can almost hear Satan giggling on his way out. He'll be

back. There's another among the rank of the disciples who will happily welcome Satan, now that his dreams have perished and his anger will consume him.

On the ground, Peter is left sweaty and exhausted, slightly dazed. He considers how shockingly subtle possession is; how the fear in his heart felt so reasonable; how he was so convinced that the trouble was with Jesus and not himself. And, he quivered to consider this deception: that his desire to spare Jesus of suffering—he would have called it love. Jesus lifts Peter with his hand and says to him, "You are setting your mind on human things, not on divine things." Then he turns to all his followers, "The cross isn't for me alone. If you want to follow me, you will have to pick up your own cross."

Wow, this is getting totally intense, the disciples must have thought, and they begin to get a panicky feeling, seeing their hopes and dreams and plans dying on the vine. You have to feel for our gang of disciples, who must have thought that the reason they were in Caesarea Philippi was for Jesus to leverage the power and fame he's accumulated to set siege on Rome. Perhaps they imagined that their greatest disappointment would be that Jesus was not the messiah. Then, they would just have to find the real one. But, now they hear that he is the real one, but what they want is not what God intends at all.

Have you ever had that panicky feeling of seeing your best laid stratagems fall apart and you wonder, "How am I going to go on?" Oddly, I think Jesus told them how to go on. "You will need to pick up your own cross." I don't think Jesus means we will all be crucified. And even if we were, like so many had been in Jesus' time, our crucifixion would not accomplish what I believe only he could accomplish. Instead, I believe we are to imitate the manner in which Jesus picks up his cross, the means by which he could bear it: He listened to the one saying to him, "You are the beloved." This is so absolutely essential that after he tells his disciples about his impending suffering, crucifixion and resurrection, he takes them up the Mountain of Transfiguration. There they hear from God directly: "This is my beloved. Listen to him."

When we follow Jesus and pick up our own cross, we are saying something like, “I will listen to the one who calls me beloved, especially in the midst of my sufferings and fears. I will surrender my fantasies of controlling the outcome of my life and the lives of those around me, even if it hurts and takes me to uncertain places. I do this because I trust that what God wants for me is to rise again after a period of desolation, because in God, love defeats the forces of death.” Let us imitate Jesus, let us listen to that same Spirit who spoke to Jesus of his Father’s unfailing love, even as he was tempted in the desert, even as he picked up his cross, even as he, now, invites us to do the same.