

Four Friends Go Camping

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church UCC Lexington

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SCRIPTURE READING Mark 8:27-9:8

It's Transfiguration Sunday which means our scripture reading will take us up a mountain, with Jesus and Peter, James and John. It's also the last Sunday before Lent begins, when we bury the alleluias and prepare to get serious. If you follow the rhythms of the church calendar you know that when these four friends come down from the mountain Jesus will turn, deliberately, to Jerusalem. But the Narrative Lectionary, which we are following through Mark this year, gives us two stories to read today before we go up the mountain - and then the back country hike up the mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John. Three stories involving Peter and Jesus.

And this year that's what caught my attention: these are stories of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Particularly these stories tell us something about the friendship between Peter and Jesus.

To set the stage before I start reading, let's recall that Mark has covered a lot of territory, literally. Jesus has been at home and all over Jewish regions of Galilee; Jesus has crossed the sea into Gentile territory, and come back again. He's taught and healed; gotten rid of demons; fed thousands; walked on water. And he's also called an unlikely crew of twelve. He's called them from boats and tax booths, away from ordinary life and into an extraordinary ministry.

Their time together so far has been super intense. In thinking about it this week I kept coming back to early adult friendships of mine - did you have those very powerful and close friendships in your early 20s? These twelve, they're part of the inner circle, seeing miracles, hearing wisdom. When Jesus offers puzzling parables, he pulls them aside to explain. They travel together, they eat together, they work together, they play together. As far as we know the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry were in large part spent with this crew. And of the twelve, Peter James and John seem to be even closer to Jesus, and Peter the most close. Folks call Peter Jesus' best friend.

As we read last week, Peter and the rest of the twelve were trusted by Jesus to go forth in his name to serve, to heal, to bless.

But here they all are, reunited with Jesus.

So here we go, to the text for today. I'll share the first portion, from Mark 8.

8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Now let me pause here...

I suppose if this were your best friend, the one you've seen exorcize demons, the one you've heard teach wisdom, the one who threw a party for 5000, the one who might might just overturn the problems of the world, the one you admire and trust, the leader of your pack, the one you recognize to be the Christ - I suppose you'd probably do the same thing as Peter. You'd naturally, instinctively cling to and protect Jesus. You would refuse any possibility of your friend's death. Because the magic has to continue, right? Because it can't just stop, right? It doesn't make sense to Peter, how could it make sense?

Jesus seems to know that the whole story doesn't make sense until the end. Until after the end, really, until the moment when new life overturns the end of the story. It doesn't make sense in the middle, even for Peter and James and John who have been there the whole time so far.

It's been beautiful and and exciting and powerful and maybe even fun and no one wants it to end.

But it will. Because the loving and just and powerful things Jesus has been doing are coming into conflict with the powers that be, and as Ched Myers says, there are "portents concerning [Jesus'] political fate."¹ And Jesus needs his friends to know the

¹ Binding the Strong Man.

road he is on, the road they are on, the road he has chosen. And something will be asked of his friends, too, especially those who are close to him, especially of those who recognize - this is God's son! This is the Christ!

The reading continues,

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

9:1 And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

Even here, I don't think Jesus is saying that the cross itself is inherently good. Rather Jesus is saying that the work of love and mercy and compassion and justice and kingdom building is so important and so worthy and so dangerous that to take up this work is to be willing to take up the cross. For the sake of God's kingdom, we know that to follow Jesus means sacrifice. "Cross bearing is not about enduring divinely willed suffering...cross bearing is being willing to endure suffering as a result of following Jesus."²

This is a test of their friendship, yes? This is a test of discipleship? Will they stay on this road?

But it's still hard to get their heads and hearts around. It doesn't make sense, even for Peter and James and John who have been there the whole time so far. It must break Peter's heart, to imagine his best friend *on a cross*. And it must scare the daylights out of all of them, that this could happen to them.

So this final part of today's story...what a gift it is. It's the last slumber party before graduation, the camping trip before chemo begins, the perfect beautiful moment to cling to, the mountain top moment.

² Call and Consequences, Raquel A. St. Clair, p.63.

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them,³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

So there they are, at the mountain top. And it's a gift for Jesus, to be there for a time of beauty, a time away, a blessed respite with friends. Hearing Abba's voice re-affirming his call, strengthening him for the journey.

And it's a gift for Peter, James and John - because Jesus has just told them what's coming. No wonder Peter says, Jesus, my friend, can't you stay here? Can't we stay here?

But they can't stay on the mountaintop. This is not what they're called to - they're called to a ministry of love and healing and justice, all the way to Jerusalem.

The friendship doesn't end on the mountain top - their friendship is itself transformed and expanded. It will be tested again, and Peter will fail again. And Jesus will give him another chance, as a divine Friend does. Jesus keeps on teaching, keeps on forgiving, keeps on giving grace and second and third and twentieth chances.

And understanding comes, eventually. In the fullness of time, in the light of an empty tomb, Jesus befriends us all.

There's a letter church tradition ascribes to Peter, that invites us into this friendship - and kingdom building - and suffering - and glory:

"12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13** But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. " (1 Peter 4:12-13)

What a friend Peter had in Jesus. What a friend we have in Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.