

Have you ever had the experience where you think you are very familiar with something and then “Wham!” Something changes your perspective, the sun shines on it, you hear it spoken instead of sung, someone else tells you their thoughts, whatever, but all of a sudden you see it, hear it, in a different light and its meaning or beauty becomes crystal clear and that meaning is different, deeper than the one you were sure of.

I had that experience with the scripture from Mark this week. Realizing something particular that I hadn't given enough weight to before and then finding how it resonated with the Tuesdays with Jesus reading from Trouble the Water and my understanding of the scripture and the whole gospel changed. I changed.

One of the most important things to know in this scripture is the location. Jesus and the disciples are at Caesarea Philippi, a city situated in the fertile basin of the River Jordan. It isn't just any city, as the name suggests it is a homage to Caesar. King Herod to whom nothing was too much to get the Emperor's good opinion had built a magnificent white marble temple to Caesar. It was one of many monuments to the power of the Roman Empire and its occupation of Israel.

This is where Jesus tells the disciples what awaits him - how he will be mistreated and rejected, be killed and rise again. This is where Peter reacted to the thought of such treatment. Peter wanted to banish it, Peter wants to reassure Jesus that pain and suffering will not come to him. Jesus' reaction must have startled him; it was so strong; calling Peter Satan must have dumbfounded all gathered there. But, there, standing in the midst of the empire - courtyards; assembly rooms and surely a throne for Emperor Augustus - there could not have been a more stark contrast between the gospel and the empire, the powers of this world. And Peter's desire to circumvent Jesus' path to resurrection seems as if Peter, given free reign, would build Jesus a temple of his own. Jesus' rebuke is not a simple one - he is not just saying, “am too”, Jesus is presenting two paths - the one of empire - the city they are standing in; and the one of the God - the cross he is heading toward. The empire will always do whatever it takes to deny suffering, not so much to alleviate it but to separate itself from it, to pretend it doesn't exist and since it doesn't exist, it need not be taken into account.

This is the choice; this is the gospel; this is what Jesus came to set in motion. Jesus, standing before this white marble temple to Caesar Augustus, virtually vibrates with revulsion. It was not going too far to invoke Satan's

name. How frustrating it must have been to him that Peter did not see the danger all around them.

And this is where the lightbulb finally went off in my heart. The disciples, the crowd, we stand in the midst of power which is pulling us one way and we don't even know it. It is as if they were standing on Wall Street, or Pennsylvania Ave. at the Mall of America or debating who the bachelor will pick and never questioning any of it. If we step back to survey the world, we would see that the empire, the power, is in charge. But there isn't a place that allows us to step that far back. We are in the center of it. We are part of it and we need to take what we see close up and realize power does not set it's mind on divine things.

I'm not sure I'll be able to communicate this clearly or not, but I'll try. The empire, the power, the kingdom of humankind is the sea we swim in. It is the structure we build and support. Only a very few know we are doing this; I would be open to believing that no one is "doing this" in a conscious move toward a goal that goes any further than their own life or their family's life.

The roots of this empire are very deep and widespread. As we start to deepen our commitment to racial justice, we begin to be able to trace those roots as they wind around other roots; as they tighten so it feels impossible to pull them out; as we get caught in them and don't even realize we are - we think we're trapped because we don't see another way. What we think is normal, acceptable, usual gets further and further from the Kingdom Jesus is calling us to. It isn't until a body of a boy shot dead by the police lays in the street for hours that we begin to question authority - what it is and what it isn't. We are not surprised when asking for help - ask to use the bathroom at a store - we are not surprised when we are turned away. Neither the turner nor the turned sees anything wrong about that. When we are sick and can't find a doctor who takes our insurance, we are not outraged or disbelieving. We are not confused by how easy it is to buy things and how difficult it is to cancel them. The collateral damage of production and construction is accepted.

I used to think that materialism was at the heart of what Jesus was drawing us away from. But it's not. It is about our life - whether we work hard to save it, to secure it, to put it first or whether we deny ourselves and follow Jesus. It's not about giving everything away, although that might be where Jesus leads you - it is about being so devoted to Jesus that you can't keep quiet at injustice; that you are willing to pick up your cross and take it to the boardroom or the streets; to carry it

to congress or maybe to decide the roots are too deep there and what is needed is another vehicle to bring about the Kingdom of God. Maybe we are called to pour our lives into a Christ centered group; to lose our lives as they intermingle with others for the sake of the gospel; a conscious goal. Maybe we, the church, can be the answer, the antidote. Maybe we need to value our lives enough to lose them for Jesus' sake - and thereby, ironically gain them. "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Jesus asks. Is it possible to gain the whole world and yet not feel we have a life? There are many who could tell you it is.

"Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" Jesus says. What can compensate us for missing the opportunity of following Christ? How can he convince us of this truth outside of asking us to give our lives? And how can we know that truth outside of trusting Jesus and giving our lives?

So what kind of pie in the sky claptrap is she trying to sell us today? I am not trying to 'sell' you anything. I am trying to tell you what the Gospel is; what the Good News is; and telling myself, and you are just stuck listening, that I can't be unaware or accepting of the unacceptable when I see it or I hear of it. Jesus says this - there are two ways to set our mind - on human things; on divine things. He stands before the temple of Caesar Augustus and asks us, no, he tells us that is the Good News - when we set our mind on picking up our cross and following him towards his cross that then we will be most truly ourselves and therefore most truly God's.