

Sermon: Questions to Ask at a Pivotal Moment**Scripture: Mark 8:27-38****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 12, 2021**

As we come back together for a new church program year, here at the beginning of September, we are given a powerful and pivotal moment in the Gospel of Mark to meditate upon and to see how it might speak into our lives at this powerful and pivotal moment. I mean, I don't know if this fall is a pivotal moment in your life, it feels pretty pivotal in my own, in my personal life with the exodus of our children out of the house and with all that's happening here at the church too with the continuing pandemic and the Associate Pastor Search, but in a certain way only time will tell if years down the road I'll look back on this moment, this fall 2021, and see it as a pivotal moment of my life.

What about for you? Is there an inflection point happening right now for you that marks a line where there was everything that happened before this moment and then everything after. You could say that 9/11 was that for our nation in certain ways, a moment that marked everything before and after. As our dear Bruce Lauterwasser says his goodbyes to the many people he loves and who love him, there will be many including his family who experience this as a pivotal moment in their lives and it's one for the life of this community too. And Bruce himself, talk about a pivotal moment, as he let's go of this existence and into the arms of his Creator.

Sometimes life's pivotal moments are only recognized in hindsight, not necessarily while they are happening to us. Only in the telling of the story of our lives later do we come to realize "oh wow, that was a pivotal moment" for me;

there was time before then and time after then and who I am now is significantly due to that moment. I would think that most of these moments are not moments that we made happen but rather moments that happen to us. Sometimes life's pivotal moments come in a conversation with someone, as simple as someone saying something to us that we needed to hear, that we were maybe finally ready to hear, and it changed everything thereafter.

In the Gospel of Mark, where we find ourselves this morning, chapter 8 is just such an inflection point in the Gospel story of Jesus as Mark tells it. Jesus comes onto the scene as an adult in the Gospel of Mark, baptized by John in the River Jordan and for 8 chapters he's preaching and teaching and healing and the people around him, both those who know him well and those who know him little are asking "who is this man? Isn't this Joseph's son in Nazareth? How does he teach with such authority? Is this the one that John was talking about who would come? How can he forgive sins? Who is this that makes the lame walk, the deaf hear, the blind see and multiplies these loaves and fish and drives out demons? And Jesus himself gives cryptic responses to such queries asking people to keep quiet about him and getting frustrated, "do you really not understand?"

And then comes chapter 8 where he feeds the 5000 and then heals the blind man Bartimaeus so that he can see... which is the perfect set up for what is to come because he's going to ask the disciples to see something that's going to be hard for them to see, that up to this point they are blind to... and so as they are walking and talking from village to village, Jesus says to the disciples "so who do people say that I am?" Do you think he asks that question as a test to the disciples? Or could it be that Jesus is wondering about the answer to that question himself when he poses it? Maybe he's genuinely wondering who he is. We do say he was fully human and who

of us doesn't wonder at times who we are, what we are called to, if we are leading the life God has asked of us? Who do people say that I am?

The disciples respond "Some say you are John the Baptist" – that's odd, isn't it? John the Baptist was a contemporary, a cousin of Jesus, how could Jesus be him, but ok. "Others say you are Elijah" – one of the greatest figures in Israel's history who supposedly didn't die but was whisked away into the heavenly realm to return again and "others say one of the prophets". The disciples left out the other choice things that people said of Jesus, that he was a charlatan, a heretic, a madman, a drunkard, a menace. That's who people said Jesus was as well.

Then Jesus turns the question to his disciples and it's a question that has come down through the centuries all the way to us and is as relevant today as it was then. "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" It is only Peter who dares answer this time and he says– "You are the Messiah" or in Greek "the Christ". But other answers too have come down across the centuries and there's probably no other figure in human history that has compelled so many to come up with so many answers to that question. We could ask one another – "who do you say Jesus is" and within this community there would be many answers: teacher, God, shepherd, savior, friend, guide, brother, Spirit. But who do you say Jesus is? And what does "who you say Jesus is" mean for your life?

Peter answers and says "you are the Christ, the one who has come to save us. And this is where the pivot point in the Gospel of Mark comes with what Jesus says next. He says immediately and sternly to Peter and the disciples, don't say that to anyone. We assume the answer is right so why would Jesus caution them strongly not to say anything to anyone? Likely because of the assumptions and expectations

which came along with that notion of the promised Messiah or Christ who would save in a particular way.

But Jesus begins to teach them what his particular Messiah-ship means; namely his journey to Jerusalem and his suffering, his dying and his death, which is how the Gospel of Mark turns and where it leads from here. Jesus taught them that the Messiah, the Anointed One of God must suffer and be rejected by all of Israel, even executed and then after all that, three days later he would rise. And how does Peter respond to Jesus? Just like any of us would if a beloved person in our lives, a teacher and mentor, told us that he had to go suffer and die – no you don't! You don't have to do that. I won't let you! There's gotta be a way to do this without that, right? That's not what the Messiah is supposed to do. And Jesus feels the same temptation he was beset by in the wilderness from the devil, to serve himself rather than God and without mincing words Jesus says to Peter "get behind me Satan, you do not have your mind set on divine things but on human things."

But we get Peter's resistance don't we? We want a strong God and a dominant Savior who heals all our illnesses and provides the path to prosperity and gives us the keys to happiness and fixes what's wrong in this world. Right? But Jesus offers us a God who meets us in vulnerability, in suffering and loss, when we fall apart and realize we are but dust, a God who slips around our categories and definitions and certainties and shows up where and when we least expect. Jesus reveals a God who ravishes our hearts more than fixes our lives, accompanies us in our dying rather than keeps us from dying, who asks us to give over ourselves rather than store up for ourselves ourselves, who doesn't magically remove our suffering and hard times but promises to redeem them.

To follow me, “you must take up your cross and follow,” Jesus finally says. Not follow me and find happiness, enjoy success and prominence, follow me and become immortal, follow me and find dominion.... But take up your cross and follow me for it is in losing your life that you will find it. It is in losing your life that you will find it. While we along with Peter are working so hard to find and keep and fulfill our lives, Jesus says lose it. Lose your life.

And I’m not going to pretend to tell you what that should mean for you and your life. You need to do the work of discerning that. I need to do the work of discerning what that means in my life right now. We can support each other in the task and that’s what a church community should do, and especially at the pivotal moments when maybe we most want to grab hold and figure it out and gain what we want, we must stop and ask how do I let go and lose my life and not do what I want but what God might want? What is my cross that I must take up... not just endure but take up and walk forward with?

So here are 3 questions for you yes, you to ask at this pivotal moment in your life:

1. Who do you say that Jesus is and if Jesus is that to you what does it mean for you are living your life? If you don’t have a ready answer for that, that’s ok, the disciples themselves struggled with who he was to them as well. It might be a good thing to bring to prayer and contemplation – who are you to me Jesus?
2. What is the cross you are being invited to take up in this pivotal moment? Something that you don’t want to do, that you would not choose for yourself but it’s for the best for the sake of others?
3. And then, finally, with cross shouldered and Jesus before you, the final question, “Ok, so where do we go from here? Lead me, Jesus, cause I want to follow. Amen.