

Second Sunday in Lent - March 8, 2009
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

By this time in Mark's gospel, many things have already happened.

You'll remember that Mark's gospel is brief, when compared to the other three. What this means is that things happen quickly in Mark's gospel. You'll remember that Mark doesn't spend any time at all talking about Jesus' birth, or the prediction of his birth. He spends no time talking about genealogy, Mary or Joseph and all the rest that we have come to know so well from the other accounts.

No, in Mark's gospel, Jesus appears on the scene while John is in the midst of baptizing people calling them to repentance and a different way of life. Jesus is baptized by John in the river and immediately thereafter is confronted by a man possessed of an evil spirit. He didn't have much time to sit back and consider his calling.

Right after that, Mark tells us of how Jesus gathered his disciples, and how, after each one is called, Jesus is tested time and again with someone needing his touch, his healing, his advice, so much so that over and over again, Jesus turns aside to pray, or takes his disciples away to a place where they can think and pray.

The early chapters of Mark have Jesus constantly barraged by people in need of healing, of demon possession, of deformity and illness. His fame spreads so quickly that Mark tells us that wherever he went, great crowds followed him. His fame spreads so far and wide that even those in the Synagogue hierarchy hear of him and one, Jairus, even calls on him to raise his daughter. The woman with the perpetual hemorrhage comes to the conclusion that even if she touches just the hem of his garment she would be healed.

This is the stuff of superstars. Even Candidate Obama didn't reach this kind of rock star status. Mark tells us in Chapter 6 that even King Herod had heard of him by this time, and Herod was fairly far removed from the wanderings of this unknown, itinerant preacher from Galilee.

By the time we get to chapter 8, Jesus had already fed the five thousand, and then four thousand on another occasion, raised someone from the dead, walked on water, healed countless misfortunates, many of them stricken since birth, and so by the time you get to this morning's readings, Jesus has pretty well established himself as something quite out of the ordinary, possessing, as Pastor Buerk has said on several occasions, "powers far beyond those of mortal men."

In the section of the gospel that immediately precedes the section you just heard, Jesus is with his disciples and in a private moment asks them, "Who do you think I am?" And, of course, Peter, answers, "You are the Christ." By this he meant, Jesus was the Anointed One, Jesus was the Messiah, the one appointed and sent by God to be the one to save Israel, to restore her to her former greatness, if not beyond, to be the one to break the yoke of Roman oppression, to bring God, our God, back to center stage. You are the Christ, Peter says.

If all this occurred in our day, this one for whom we have waited will be the one to not only fix the sinking economy, give us universal health care, make children respectful again, reform television so that you can watch a show without incessant sexual innuendo, for heaven's sake, even M&M commercials have sexy red candies trying to seduce the blues and greens.

A contemporary Messiah would end partisan bickering, removed pork from the stimulus package, self interest would take a back seat to the good of the Republic. Sunni and Shiite would coexist peacefully, all nuclear weapons would be banned and there would be food for all and to spare, the new Peace Bridge would become a reality, reality television would come to an end, and Buffalo would be listed among the top ten places to live in the United States.

"You are the Christ," Peter said, "you are the one in whom all our hopes rest." As long as I have you to follow I can leave my GPS at home and I can turn off my cell phone because no call coming in could proffer me a better alternative than the one you promise.

And then, we read this, "And he began then to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days, rise again."

And Peter says, "God forbid," and Peter says, "Say it ain't so." And Peter says, "Over my dead body."

And Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan." Where Satan is not the evil one with the pitchfork who rules over Hell, but rather the one who is God's adversary, who throws things in your path to force you to take another route from the one you set out on, the adversary of righteousness, who, like the gods of ancient Greece, came down to meddle with humans for the sport of it.

"Get behind me, Satan," Jesus says, "Get out of my way, don't try to dissuade me from following the path my Father in heaven has set out for me, because the road YOU think we're on, is not the road God has planned. Where you think I have come to do battle with the petty forces of everyday life, I have come for a larger reason."

Because all things considered, when compared to the larger issues of life and death,

- when held up against the promise of an eternal life, of the victory over death, the Roman Authorities are but a temporary nuisance,
- the conceit and selfish agenda of the Pharisees and the scribes and the priests whose only interest is the preservation of the status quo and their own positions, a minor concern
- the daily concerns of who owns what, of how much we have left in our portfolios, of who holds the power, of who's in control, of who calls the shots, of all the things with which we typically concern ourselves and fret over and lose sleep over, Jesus says, "What will it profit us to gain the whole world and forfeit our life?"

In yesterday's email, I received a cute little story from Chuck Rojek who had received it from Peter Angelakos who sent it to Sue Saur, and Sue Spindler and probably a dozen more of you. For those of you who aren't on Chuck's email list, the story reads like this:

A boat docked in a tiny, local seaside village. An American tourist complimented the local fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took him to catch them.

"Not very long," he answered.

"But then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?" asked the American.

The local explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family.

The American asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

"I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the evenings, I go into the village to see my friends, have a few drinks, play the guitar, and sing a few songs. I have a full life."

The American interrupted, "I have an MBA from Harvard and I can help you! You should start by fishing longer every day. You can then sell the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue, you can buy a bigger boat."

"And after that?" asked the fisherman.

"With the extra money the larger boat will bring, you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet of trawlers. Instead of selling your fish to a middle man, you can then negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move to Mexico City, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge new enterprise."

How long would that take?" asked the fisherman.

"Twenty, perhaps twenty-five years," replied the American.

"And after that?"

"Afterwards? Well my friend, that's when it gets really interesting," answered the American, laughing. "When your business gets really big, you can start buying and selling stocks and make millions!"

"Millions? Really? And after that?" asked his interested friend?

"After that you'll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take a siesta with your wife and spend your evenings drinking and enjoying your friends."

I've always struggled with the phrase, "For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life will keep it for eternal life," until it dawned on me that what Jesus was talking about was the fact that we've set our sights on that which is perishable and neglected focusing on that which is lasting, and eternal.

If love is the only thing that lasts and endures beyond the grave, then it's the only thing worth pursuing on this side of it.

Let that be your Lenten lesson for this week.

Amen.