

“NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!”

Mark 8:31-36

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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I know I am dating myself and you will be, too, if you remember the old commercials for Coca-Cola that declared to us authoritatively that *“things go better with Coke.”* The ads pictured various scenes of pleasure and leisure, and life would be serene and copacetic as long as we drink Coca-Cola. Drinking Coca-Cola, the commercials claimed, was the ticket to a better, easier, happier life.

*Things go better with Coca-Cola,
Things go better with Coke.
Food goes better with,
Fun goes better with,
You go better with,
Things go better with Coke.*

So what does an ancient ad campaign for Coca-Cola have to do with Jesus Christ and a Sunday sermon? Here’s my segue: There is a popular perception in Christian Land that “things go better with God.” Or at least that is many of us expect. Peter, a disciple of Jesus, certainly thought so. The proof is in our text of the morning.

Jesus just had inquired of the disciples what people were saying about him. *“Who do the people say that I am?”* Jesus asked. The disciples told Jesus that people were speculating he is Elijah or John the Baptist-come-back-to-life or one of the other prophets. Jesus then turns the tables on the disciples and asks them, *“Who do you say I am?”* Never one to hold back, Peter pipes up: *“You are the Messiah.”*

Accepting Peter's assessment, Jesus immediately shares with his disciples the news that he will have to undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders, killed, and after three days rise again. Peter, in less time than it takes the NRA to defend guns after school shootings, Peter quickly cries, "No! No! No! No! No!" "That cannot happen. It will not happen. You are the Messiah and that is not what happens to Messiahs. Things are supposed to go *better* with God."

In Jewish circles, the long-expected Messiah was perceived to be someone who would be supernaturally empowered to thwart greedy exploiters and tame political oppressors. The Jews eagerly anticipated that their Messiah would deliver them from the stifling Roman occupation and inaugurate a golden era of peace and prosperity, serenity and privilege.

Thus, when Jesus announces that suffering, repudiation, and execution are in his path, Peter is having none of it. "No! No! No! No! No!" When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, he obviously has in mind a different scenario for Jesus and his followers than Jesus does. Peter finds talk of an anguished and dying Messiah repugnant, repulsive, reprehensible. Peter's hope is that the Messiah will incite a revolution against the Romans and inflict suffering, not experience it.

When Jesus tells the disciples it is necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to be rejected, it is because he knows his persistent pursuit of the divine desire for justice for those on the margins and in the underbelly of society will exact a great price and he, Jesus, is not going to back away. He knows he will come into conflict with the religious authorities who are more than willing to accommodate the Roman occupiers if they themselves can benefit. Jesus knows his suffering and death are political inevitabilities given his priorities and principles.¹

But Peter rebukes Jesus: "No! No! No! No! No!" The word Mark uses to describe Peter's dismay is the same word he uses in his gospel to describe Jesus rebuking and casting out demons. Mark uses that word to let us know that Peter sees something demonic in Jesus that needs to be exorcised, cut out. Peter falls into the same trap as some of the relatives of Jesus who think Jesus is no stable genius² but a little off his rocker.³

Peter, though, is the one who actually takes leave of his senses. In zinging Jesus, in raking Jesus over the coals for announcing an impending path of pain, Peter stakes out a position superior to Jesus. He implies he knows better than Jesus the way ahead and needs to cast out the demons that are making Jesus delusional. In seeking to define Jesus over and against Jesus' own

¹ Myers, Ched, [Binding the Strong Man](#), p. 243-244.

² Words the current president recently used to describe himself in defense of others' thoughts otherwise.

³ Mark 3:21

self-definition, in saying to Jesus, “No! No! No! No! No!,” Peter takes the role of Jesus’ master, not his disciple.

Jesus responds that either Peter and the other disciples will follow his mold-breaking profile as the Messiah and embrace the suffering that will attend him and them or they will be a “Satan” - an adversary - to Jesus. When Jesus says to Peter, “*Get thee behind me, Satan,*” Jesus is not calling Peter the devil but reminding him that God’s ways are not our ways and to “get with the program” and not stand opposed to what God is doing in the Christ, in the Messiah.

The first sermon Jesus ever preached, a very brief one, the one with which Mark begins his account of the gospel, is to “*repent and believe in the gospel.*”⁴ Do not be bound by the limitations of your human perspective, Jesus tells Peter, but repent and go beyond your present mind to embrace the mind of the Messiah. To do any less or other is devilish, diabolical, demoniacal. Set your mind on the divine wisdom and not on the human point of view which is by nature limited, partial, and incomplete.

Next, Jesus, noticing many people gathering around, turns to speak with them, too. Lest any of them - disciples or clamoring crowd - misconstrue, misconceive, or misinterpret the ministry and mission of the Messiah, Jesus says to the listening throng in whose numbers Mark means to include us, “*If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.*”

Mark frames this scene as a public and corporate call to discipleship. To deny the self, to take up the cross, and to follow Jesus are to become the vocations of his followers, the vocations of the church. They are to become the measures of a movement that sweep the nations toward liberty, justice, hospitality, and peace for all. It is not a call to a puny personal piety that gives up chocolate for Lent. When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves he has more in mind than for us to forego a few of our favorite things. He means for us to deny or to die to the cult of “self” that is our default mode and is exemplified by our quest for self-esteem, self-actualization, self-help, and self-righteousness with a little dash of self-pity thrown in when things do not go our way.

How do we deny our obsession with our kingdom of self? By *taking up the cross*. “Taking up the cross” does not mean enduring stoically the real or imagined hardships of life. A tedious mother-in-law is not a cross; our inability to afford a second home is not a cross; being a Phillies fan is not a cross (well, maybe *that* is). To take up our cross means to take on the same trajectory and track for our lives as Jesus did for his. Sharyn Dowd in her book, Reading Mark, describes well what it means to deny ourselves and to take up the cross and follow Jesus: “*It*

⁴ Mark 1:15

means abandoning all claims to self-definition and accepting God's program for us and God's claim upon our lives."⁵

Yikes! No wonder Annie Dillard writes that when we enter the sanctuary on Sunday mornings we better strap on our crash helmets and buckle up our seat belts!⁶

Things in the end do go better with God in consideration of our experience of living a life close to God's heart and our final vindication by resurrection. In his final conversation with his disciples before his death, Jesus told them that everything he did, said, and taught them was so they could know the deep joy of God's ways.⁷ In our Lenten Devotional Booklets yesterday we read that "to encounter Jesus is to go on a life-changing journey. Along the way, a transformation occurs in our living, thinking, and awareness."⁸ But, as that happens and contrary to Peter's illusory expectations, the Christian life in the nearer term will be fraught with bumps, sorrows, and sacrifice as it was for Jesus and, as Peter came to find out, for him as well.

The gospel teaching for this day is that we find out who we really are not by endless introspection but by discovering who Jesus is. "*Let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me.*" Here is the hard word for us contemporaries: every time we try to define the Messiah as primarily a purveyor of private spiritual blessings we will hear the refrain if we listen, "*Get behind me, Satan.*" Watering down the gospel to make it more warm and fuzzy and palatable is one of the leading causes for the decline of the church. No wonder Jesus wanted to turn water into wine! The kingdom of God is much more about "we" than "me" though every "me" is a part of the "we." The kingdom of God is about making life just and livable for everyone.

I am much instructed by the letters of Mother Teresa published several years ago in which she admitted that for the last fifty years of her life she did not feel or sense the presence of God. Her life was not filled with spiritual highs and gospel candy bars. Nevertheless, she kept on

⁵ Dowd, Sharyn, Reading Mark p.89.

⁶ The full quotation is priceless: Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we all should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return." —Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

⁷John 15:11

⁸ "Jesus and the Prophets" by Jimmie R. Hawkins, February 24, 2018

following Jesus by serving the poor in the ghettos of Calcutta and in many other ways.⁹ *“Let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me.”*

When we measure our religion by how much we get out of it, we have lost our way. When we give up on God because of suffering that comes upon us, we have lost our way. When we follow our own interests instead of serving the interests of Jesus the Christ, we have lost our way.

For Mark, following Jesus is not one choice amid many different choices. It is the *only* choice that results in true and authentic life despite the suffering, hardships, and death that come to us as we follow. We can go another way, Jesus admits, but, he says, *“What profit is it for someone to gain the world but to forfeit life?”*

The truth is that the way of the cross is hard. It calls us to spurn personal advantage and benefit for the sake of the larger and common good. It may mean boarding a bus early on a Saturday morning to be a part of a crowd in Washington demanding of our president and representatives just and stringent laws regarding guns. It means loving those who are hard to love; forgiving others when to do so is emotionally expensive; showing mercy to those who themselves do not. It means not giving up hope even in the face of contrary power, evil, and depravity. It means decrying bigotry and violence in all of their forms. It means relinquishing or dying to old beliefs or ways of being and relating that do not serve the purposes of God. It means standing against privilege that pillages the lives of the poor and people of color and even the lives of the privileged ones themselves who in their privilege stray from the heart of the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus said. *“Blessed are the poor and humble in spirit; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; who dare to wage peace in the world, who prize justice and do it.”*¹⁰

Suffering, rejection, and dying to the dreams of what the world defines as “the good life” are not aberrations of the Christian life but the heart of it. Jesus said that *“the kingdom of God has come near.”*¹¹ It is not far away. It is not a paradise lost. It only requires that disciples of Jesus give their lives to it and trust the Lord for it to come to fruition. We pray “Thy kingdom come”¹² and then we become the vessels through which it happens.

⁹ Mother Teresa, [Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light](#) (published by Image Books).

¹⁰ Matthew 5:12 and Micah 6:8

¹¹ Mark 1:15

¹² Matthew 6:10

Jesus told a parable about adding a pinch of leaven to a lump of dough that would cause the whole loaf to rise.¹³ In like manner, it doesn't require everyone in the world to change before we can see in our midst the fullness of the kingdom of God emerging. Only a pinch of leaven, only a modest number of Jesus-followers fully committed to the road the Messiah treads, is needed to cause the whole world to be raised into a reconciling and harmonious community.

Then will "No! No! No! No! No!" become "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" to the glory of God!

Amen.

¹³ Mark 13:33