

Sermon – Mark 8:27-38
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“Saved and Sent by the Suffering Servant”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Did you see him? I thought I saw him last week. The messiah, that is. At least, it sure looked like him; just what I expected. God’s chosen people were being overrun and shamed, set to rout in their own home. He himself was hurt, dejected, and, it seemed, defeated. Those around him spit and spoke insults. The crowds booed and taunted. All seemed lost. But then, then, the once-disgraced figure came back, turning certain defeat into sweet, glorious victory. A messiah, an anointed one, had done the impossible, and the swarming hoards of enemies were sent home. While once they looked to conquer in victory, now they found themselves to be the surprising losers. Wait, I’m not the only one who saw something messianic about Aaron Rodgers as he led the Green Bay Packers to an amazing come-from-behind victory over the Bears, am? Was I the only to see the divine at work bringing conquest and joy to the Frozen Chosen? No? Just me? Well, whatever your reaction to the game and its outcome, Rodgers’ performance was the sort of thing people love (unless you’re on the wrong end of it). Even the voices of sports radio in Chicagoland could do nothing but marvel and wonder this past Monday morning, dreaming that young Mitchell Trubisky would one day become such a quarterback. After all, who doesn’t love to see the almost-beaten hero reverse the story and save the day? We yearn for saviors such as these, and revel in the stories that they write through their heroic deeds.

2. Now, I'm not going to stand in this pulpit and claim that God is a Green Bay Packers fan – although this green is a lovely color. But I digress. That said, I do think the apostle Peter would have loved Aaron Rodgers. A leader chosen for glory, putting the occupying oppressors to rout and grabbing victory from the jaws of defeat? Yes, that's just what Peter was looking for. Peter knew the story of downtrodden oppression, for it was the story that filled the thick air breathed by his people for generations. But they were not beaten yet; God was on their side and the Messiah would come to lead them to victory. So when Jesus asks that all-important question, "Who do you say that I am," Peter is ready with the answer that filled his heart with hope: "You are the Messiah." The One anointed by God. The One who, though bruised and battered, will emerge to lead us to victory. The problem, of course, is that Peter gets the title right but the meaning wrong. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, the One chosen. But chosen for what? Chosen to undergo great suffering, chosen to be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. Chosen to be killed. And yes, on the third day chosen to be raised, but Peter had stopped listening by that point. Jesus would suffer? Be shamed? Not almost lose, but die? Well, that was something Peter just couldn't understand. I'm not sure we can, either. And yet this is the great mystery that stands at the center of our faith, the great truth of what is not only Jesus' identity, but our own.
3. Peter rebukes Jesus, implying that he's gone crazy, that in order to say such things he must be possessed. But it is Peter who has given his mind over to the demonic, Peter who has set his mind on human things like victory and glory and retribution rather than thinking of a divine love that is willing to suffer for its beloved. Jesus alone knows and understands the purpose for which he has been chosen and anointed; Jesus alone understands what being the Messiah means, and what it doesn't. It doesn't mean a narrow escape, a fourth-quarter escape, or a last-minute rally. It doesn't mean almost dying. Jesus is chosen by his Father to die, not as an accident but as an offering, proof of God's love for us – a love that is willing to suffer our fate in order

grace us with what we do not deserve: life. This death, this cross, this fate chosen for Jesus is not accidental to his identity or to God's; the loving self-sacrifice reveals the true nature of our God; the cross is the only lens through which Jesus and his work come rightly into view. The third-day resurrection does not erase this fact; it underscores it. For Jesus does not emerge from the tomb to claim victory over his enemies; he returns to make peace, to give forgiveness, and to show the way home to the Father who chose him that we, too, might find our chosen-ness in his death and our life in his resurrection. Jesus must lose his life to find it; in him, we must die that we would live.

4. This morning, Paige will be baptized into Jesus' death. Into his loss. Into his sacrifice. She will be marked not with the box score of victory, but with the cross of Christ. Today, Paige loses. She loses her life into the lost life of Jesus, and finds a new life of service – even in suffering and for the sake of love – in Jesus' resurrection. It is not a path of glory that Paige starts to walk today, but it is the only path of life. And so we, on her behalf, will renounce those same forces of sin and evil that warped Peter's vision. We renounce these demonic forces so that they will not warp our vision, our living. For we follow Jesus, who came to suffer, to lose, to die – all to show us the true nature of God and to usher us into newness of life with God. God, whose divinity is not found in cosmic aloofness but rather in earthy loss and a cross of suffering and shame. For who is God if not the One both able and willing to do such things for us, to find us where we are and join us in the lost-ness of death so that with him we would live?

5. We need to die in order to truly live. After all, it is from ourselves that we most need saving. To quote "Pogo," of all things, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." It is so easy, *so easy*, to imagine that the problem is others and that devils only live elsewhere. In our all-too-polarized world, it's the easiest thing in the world to *other* the other, to blame some "them" without examining ourselves. While it is true that there are others in this world that

enact evil, Jesus reminds us today that the work of the gospel begins in and with each of us. Jesus doesn't call us to follow him as he defeats our enemies; he invites us to follow him to his own death that will be our undoing, too. Take up your cross. Come, follow, and die. Hard words, but the only words that point to life. And as we are undone, so too are we remade by the work of the cross, shaped as servants sent into this world.

6. No, Jesus is not the Messiah we'd choose. But the choice was never up to us. We're the ones who need saving, not the ones who get to choose who will save us. Like Paige, you have been washed in the waters of death and life; you have been joined to this chosen One who came to die. In him, you are dead. And in him, you are alive. Take up your cross and follow. It won't always take you where you want to go. But it is the cross of Christ that you carry, and he will be with you. And that means that you'll always be exactly where you need to be. We might never choose such a Messiah. No matter. He has chosen you. That's the only thing that matters. Here these words of invitation: "Follow me," he says. May we be faithful to his call. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.