

The Enemy Within

Mark 8:31-38

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³¹ And he began 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. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." ³⁴ And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his life? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Mark's Gospel starts off with a trumpet call. He announces to anyone who picks up this book: This is the proclamation of the good news of God's victory through his anointed one, named Jesus. This Jesus, whose Hebrew name would have been Joshua was indeed going to accomplish victory for the people of God by leading them into a new land. And that he is a victor as Joshua was is confirmed when, at his baptism, he comes out of the Jordan waters and God's voice from heaven proclaims him "my son", words that would have recalled to the people the words spoken by God to king David: The Lord said to me "you are my son today I have begotten you". Here now is a new king, and his name is Jesus.

And as king the people expect that his first move will be to march on Jerusalem and defeat the enemies of Israel, the Romans. But that's not what happens. Instead, the spirit that anoints him at his baptism pushes him deep into the wilderness where he confronts the real enemy, the real one who holds the people in chains and darkness. There, in the wilderness, surrounded by wild beasts, ministered to by the angels of God, Jesus faces the real enemy, Satan, before heading back into Galilee and announcing to the people: the dawn of God's victory has arrived. Get ready.

Those are just the first 15 verses of the Gospel of Mark. But what follows in Mark as you know is the unfolding story of that dawning of victory over Satan and his legions. The students of Jesus -- starting with Peter and Andrew, James and John -- follow Jesus and prepare for the victory of God. They see abundant proofs that that victory is coming in skirmishes in synagogues, homes, on the sea of Galilee. But Jesus students are still waiting for the real victory because they have yet to learn the lesson about who the real enemy is and about how the victory of God is going to be won. They're still waiting for Jesus to set his aim on Jerusalem and seize power, almost certainly with great loss of life to those that the students still think are the real enemies of God.

And then we come to the very heart of the Gospel of Mark, the very middle of the book, chapter 8, to the reading for this morning. It is the first time that Jesus has spoken clearly about what will happen WHEN they do get to Jerusalem. "And [Jesus] began 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. ³² And he said this plainly”

For the first time, Jesus’ students -- that’s what the word “disciple” means -- hear that the battle that will lead to victory is going to result in the death of the very one that they are following as victor. The victory of God has begun to dawn, but before the high noon of God’s victory, something is going to happen, something terrible, something ominous, something that will make it look as though the enemy will have won. Jesus will be rejected by those charged with ministering to Israel; he will be handed over by them to the Romans to be killed. Jesus’ students must have only barely heard that God would vindicate him by raising Jesus on the third day.

This is the first time that Jesus’ students have heard that THIS is how the victory is to be won. And they must have been shocked. They were planning to ride to Jerusalem with Jesus and to see the Romans defeated by God, along with the puppet government of priests that ruled from the Temple. They are expecting this because this is how humans have always achieved victory: they kill and they conquer. This is how the Taliban thinks of victory. This is how ISIS thinks of victory. This is unfortunately how many Christians have thought of victory of their cause through the ages.

And this is clearly how Jesus’ students thought of victory. Because Peter, one of Jesus’ star pupils, hears Jesus and does exactly what any man would do who is thinking in human terms: “Peter took him, and began to rebuke him.” The word “rebuke” here is the same word that Mark has used of how Jesus deals with demons: he rebukes them and silences them. It is the same word that Mark uses for what Jesus does with the wild Sea of Galilee: he rebuked the winds and calmed the waters. Peter takes Jesus and rebukes him in order to silence him. ‘Lord, you know better than that. You know our victory is to be achieved: the same way that the first Joshua did it. The same way that David did it. By military force -- either human or angelic -- and the death of the oppressor.’ Peter thinks that he knows better than the Lord himself what is required, and that is not that the Lord suffer but that the Lord defeat and kill once and for all the enemies, the Romans and their Jewish puppets.

But, what was Jesus’ response to Peter: ³³ turning and seeing his disciples [his students], [Jesus] rebuked Peter.” Jesus sees the students that he has gathered to himself to learn from him, to follow him, and to announce with him the victory of God, and he sees what kind of impact Peter’s words would have if left unchallenged. And so he speaks to Peter as Peter needs to be spoken to, as one would speak to a demon: Jesus rebukes Peter.

In fact, he speaks to Peter as one would speak to the father of the demons because that’s where these words come from, the father of the demons: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.”

Right from the start of Mark’s Gospel, we saw that Satan is the real enemy of God. Not the Romans, not the Parthians living in present day Iran, not the Barbarians of the cold north of Europe, not the Taliban, not ISIS. It was Satan who had chained up weak and vulnerable humans in order to torment them and to use them for his purposes.

But, Satan was “out there”. Out in the wilderness. Outside of our village. Out in the night. Out beyond our comfortable homes. We accept that Satan is the enemy, the true enemy, but Satan is out there, even if not just in Rome, or Iran, or Afghanistan... Satan is still “out there” somewhere.

But here, lo and behold, we find Jesus confronting Satan right in the midst of the earliest church, right there in fact speaking through Jesus' star pupil, Peter.

My friends, it is very possible that you have gotten clear the message from the opening verses of this Gospel and that you know who the real enemy is. You know, along with Mark and the apostle Paul, that our enemy is the power and principality of the air. You know that our true spiritual battle therefore is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers. But, my guess is that you believe that the enemy is always "out there", some place else, and yes, probably associated with other people.

But, what happens when the enemy is right here? Right in our midst, taking us by the shoulder as Peter took Jesus to rebuke him and set him straight on what victory really means? Telling us, as Peter tried to tell Jesus: 'I know a better way for victory. Follow me, and you won't have to lose your life.'

Satan's words spoken to Jesus through Peter were the same words as Satan spoke to Jesus in the wilderness: 'you can save yourself; it doesn't have to happen the way you've said it.' Jesus has heard Peter perfectly, and he's heard the voice of Satan speaking to him again through Peter: 'You want me to save myself and to hang on to what I have as if in doing so I could gain the whole world.' Peter wanted Jesus to strive to hang on to his life and to go on to the glorious military victory in Jerusalem as God's Messiah as if that would be the victory of God rather than just another slaughter of men and women, one of the many cycles of violence in the history of man since Cain and Abel.

That's how Satan oppresses people: by having them take their eyes off of God and to focus on hanging on to what they have, even if what they have is little and miserable... their land, their money, their honour, their health, their youth... Because by seeking to hang on to these things, even if it means oppressing, and abusing, and even killing others to do so, Satan knows that humans will fail again and again. What do the demons scream at Jesus when he comes near them: 'Leave us alone. Let us be. Let us hang on to the miserable lot that we have.'

This is the voice of evil, and it is heard even in the midst of the church, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic... it doesn't matter. It is especially the voice of those who hide in churches, people who are desperate to secure their lives by keeping their secrets hidden and who know that they can find refuge in the church, "people of the lie" as Scott Peck calls them. Every church known to man has such people who use the church as a cover for evil in order to mask their selfish desires. But it is also the voice of other people, people who may seem to us like quite good Christians, but who just want God to leave them alone so that they can achieve their goals. If Satan can get people so focussed on their own needs and take their attention off the only road to heaven, which is God's concern, then he will have succeeded. And that's how he uses Peter.

The victory that our Lord promises, and the one that we know is sure even as we know for sure that Easter is coming, is not so. The road to victory is not through hanging on to what you have and even accumulating more along the way. Jesus tells all of his students that the road to Easter goes by way of the cross, the way of complete and utter loss, because that is God's way. And it is not just Jesus' way. It is the way that he tells his followers they, too, must go. For Jesus tells Peter "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." 'For what will it profit you if you hold on to what you have, even gain the whole world, and you have done so in spite of God? It will profit you nothing. So come and follow me, and the Father will give you a life that is much greater than you could ask or imagine.'

It's striking how many people believe that Christians should be spared martyrdom, and so we pray for safety and security for ourselves and the church. But, in fact, martyrdom -- whether it be in body or in some other form -- is the only way to be a Christian: by the cross to resurrection glory. Jesus gave us an example that we should follow, not a passport that frees us from following him. In baptism every Christian agrees to accept the seal of dying with Christ, in order to be raised with him. This is not just a metaphor. This is the Christian life.

Like the cross of Jesus, our lives will look like defeats in the eyes of the world, even as Jesus appeared to have been defeated in the eyes of the world. But, as you know well, Jesus was anything but defeated, and neither will we be... if we remain firm unto death, we shall reign with him.

And that was also true for Peter, whom Jesus here calls Satan. Because in the end, let's not forget that it was Peter, once he was turned from his Satanic words and became a man of God rather than just another man among men ... it was Peter who became the one in whom Jesus vested authority to hold the keys of the Church, a Church that would be built on Peter the Rock, a Church against whom the forces of darkness and oppression, the forces of Hell and Hell's Satan, would never, ever prevail.