

**2 Lent – Year B – March 8, 2009**  
**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38**  
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Outside of these walls there are signs of Spring – blades of new life shooting up from the earth. There are buds forming on the trees, longer days, and shorter nights. Inside, you have probably noticed that the sanctuary and the altar look different during Lent. The Lord’s Table is draped in purple hangings, and the crosses are veiled as visible signs of repentance. There are no flowers behind the altar. Our liturgy, or our work of worship in community, is also different. We are reading the Ten Commandments and confessing our sins early in the service. We are asking the Lord to have mercy upon us in the *Kyrie*, instead of singing Glory to God. Our music reflects the tone of the season. That is to say that with all of our senses we are experiencing this time of Lent in a deliberate way that reminds us that this season is new and different. For our Lenten disciplines, much of our focus is on service as well as prayer, self-reflection, and Bible study.

In our study of the Gospel lesson this week, we are prompted to ponder a couple of questions. The first is “who’s in charge?” The second is “now what?” The disciple Peter is our champion and the one who dares to risk, on behalf of all of Jesus’ disciples, including you and me. In the reading just before today’s lesson, Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah. You can almost hear the choirs of angels cheering. And then he goes and blows it a few moments later by rebuking Jesus for teaching that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering”. It is natural to want to give Peter the benefit of the doubt. Yet because Mark is written with just great economy of words, we have to pay close attention to what exactly is going on here, especially in the actions of the characters involved.

As Jesus is teaching about what is soon to happen, notice that He calls Himself, Son of Man. This is not a common designation for Jesus in the Gospels, which tells us that its meaning was not generally well-understood or already in common usage by the time the Gospel of Mark was written. Like this season of Lent, expectation is in the air, because something new is happening here. Jesus is the only person who uses that title in describing Himself. Other titles, like Messiah and Son of God, were already known to refer to God’s anointed ones – the human kings that are God’s agents on earth. In the context of what has just transpired with Peter proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, when Jesus immediately calls Himself the Son of Man, we can be sure that there is much more to the definition of “anointed one” than Peter understood. In fact, Son of Man is Jesus’ way of expanding the definition of what it means to be the Messiah. He isn’t just a human being anointed by God as king. In Israel’s history the king has usually been the leader of an army, and led Israel to victory over her enemies through the power of the sword, according to God’s will. Jesus is *the* King: fully human and fully divine. And look – no army, just a rag-tag band of followers. He wields no sword made by human hands – just the power of the Word.

Jesus’ teaching is about His suffering, His rejection, His death, and how God will vindicate all this through His glorious resurrection. All is as it should be – the disciples are listening to their teacher. Then Peter drags Jesus aside and starts telling Him off. That’s like a fifth grader marching to the front of the class, writing the teacher a slip, and sending him or her to the principal’s office. You know that ugly buzzer noise when the answer is wrong on a game show! There’s something very wrong with this picture. Peter’s actions tell you, me and Jesus that he is trying to take charge, and Jesus will have none of it. In the perfect teachable moment, Jesus expands on what God intends for the Son of Man. And that definition is a lot different to Peter’s. Jesus is the only one who can define the meaning of being the Son of Man, and what His life of humble service means, as well as how we are to understand His rejection, humiliating death on the cross, and most importantly His resurrection. In Christ, everything Peter thought he knew is changed. It is a whole new world. I want to think that Peter was stunned, and silenced as the thought crossed his mind, “now what?” “Now what?” is

precisely where Jesus takes us next.

We have to visualize the scene before us. Peter has just pulled Jesus to one side. Then we hear this, “But turning and looking at his disciples, [Jesus] rebuked Peter.” He turns his back on Peter. The moment Peter thought he was in charge, he is no longer a disciple of Jesus, and according to Jesus Peter is aligning himself with Satan. That harsh rebuke from Jesus makes us all gasp and start. What was Satan’s sin against God? Just like you and me, Satan is one of God’s creatures, and it was Satan’s pride that was his complete and irrevocable undoing. The moment Peter, you, me, and any Christian tries to make Jesus subordinate to ourselves, we are – in our pride – opening the door to the forces of evil in the world. Pride makes us vulnerable to evil. Pride of self is the biggest temptation we fall prey too. Satan’s tricks haven’t changed much. He used the very same temptation of pride with Jesus in the wilderness. When we are full of pride, we start to believe the lie that we’re in charge. You know that ugly buzzer noise ...! As followers of Christ, let’s remember that Jesus’ entire life was a model of humility and humble service. When we put self first, we are no longer putting God first, nor are we following Jesus. What we are doing is heading out on our own foolish path. Now I can testify that every single time I have tried to walk ahead of the Lord in my life, things have not gone well.

Being alert and intentional is an important part of noticing how God is working the miracle of change in us and all around us. Jesus is stretching us all to deepen our faith, and understand what it means to follow the Son of Man. By believing that Jesus is the Son of Man, in the way Jesus defines Himself, we set our hearts to Him, and follow where He leads. Part of our “now what?” is denying self, the other part is taking up our cross and following Jesus. In worldly terms, the Roman Empire defined the cross as a sign of shame, humiliation, and death. In God’s terms the cross is the way to freedom and victory in Christ Jesus our Lord. The implications of discipleship are clearly spelled out for us. The terms of picking up our cross and following Jesus impact every sphere of our lives. They are relational, socio-economic, and involve our cultural status. The specific language used relates to the honor-shame society in which Jesus lived, but is just as relevant today as it was in the first century.

Being part of the Body of Christ is a radically new way of being in relationship. However it might appear, our bonds as brothers and sisters in Christ are eternal, not just the temporal or familial by way of our flesh and blood. In terms of the socio-economic system, Jesus understood that living a life that focuses on gaining monetary wealth is very tempting. Interestingly enough, God doesn’t have a problem with rich people or poor people. It is not how much or how little money we have that causes us to stumble. It is whether or not we use what we have in service to the Lord, for God’s purposes, and especially in pursuit of justice and equality. Jesus uses financial reference points like profit and loss so that we can appreciate His point. In other words, as followers of Christ, not only do we have new and everlasting bonds of relationship beyond family and friends, but our relationship with the stuff of the world is different as well. As Jesus’ disciples, we are each accountable to God as the stewards of His good gifts. And finally, what is the shame that Jesus is talking about? It is simply trying to hide the light of Christ, by failing to be a bold witness for Christ in word and in deed. There is no hiding Christ. Just as during this season of Lenten renewal, all creation is springing to life around us, we too are blessed with this time to return to God, always yielding to the still small voice calling us to put our faith into action in new ways, to the glory of God. It is up to you and me to show the world that following Jesus in the way of the cross is the way of life and peace, God’s graciousness and mercy, and the miracle of love.

Amen.