Working Preacher

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Second Sunday in Lent

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Gospel

Commentary on Mark 8:31-38

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Narrative context is so important.

When this passage is taken out of context, it seems to suggest that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is to suffer and die. However, when we read it within its narrative context, we come to see that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is to give life—knowing that earthly powers will violently oppose them.

The passage picks up in the middle of a private conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus has just acknowledged that he is the Messiah, the anointed king through whom God will deliver God's people (Mark 8:27-30). We can imagine that the disciples associate this title with earthly glory. After all, they will soon argue about which one of them is the greatest (Mark 9:33-34), and some will request from Jesus the most honorable seats in his kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). In the disciples' defense, they have witnessed a great deal of local fanfare, with crowds of mostly peasant villagers swarming to Jesus in order to witness and receive his healing powers (for example, Mark 2:1; 3:7-10; 4:1; 6:53-56). When local leaders oppose Jesus, he always bests them in debate (Mark 2:6-12; 3:22-27; 7:1-13), so we cannot really blame the disciples for seeing their future, as Jesus' closest followers, through rose-colored glasses.

But now, in the middle of Mark's narrative, Jesus lays it out plainly. To this point, he has spoken only cryptically about persecution (Mark 4:17). Now he says clearly that he, the Son of Man, must undergo rejection, suffering, and death (verse 31). It is precisely for this reason that his followers will take up crosses and lose their lives (verses 34-35). Yes, Jesus will rise again, and yes, persecuted and martyred disciples will receive new life. But the hard truth is that the road to messianic glory runs through Golgotha. The disciples are following Jesus to a cross.

Much depends on how we interpret the "must" (*dei*: "it is necessary") of verse 31. Too often the word is taken to mean that Jesus' mission is principally to suffer and die, with interpreters inferring a latent theology of vicarious atonement. In this reading, Jesus "must" go to the cross in order to affect a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. But while Mark may hint at some mysterious efficacy to Jesus' death (10:45; 14:22-25), he is far from so specific an atonement theology (contrast Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 9:23-28). More to

the point, when we pan out beyond one or two isolated verses, we find that the overarching narrative offers a simpler, but no less profound, explanation of Jesus' death: Jesus dies because powerful humans oppose both his healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption that mission brings to established law and order. Unbeknownst to Jesus' opponents, they are opposing the in-breaking reign ("kingdom") of God.

This pattern of disruption plays out in Mark's early conflict scenes. Jesus is unflinching in his insistence that the divine mission to welcome and reconcile sinners overrides the stigma of associating with them (2:15-17). He is also unflinching in his insistence that the divine mission to alleviate human suffering overrides any application of religious tradition that might impede it (2:23-28; 3:1-6; 7:1-23). To be clear, this is not a "Christian" correction to supposedly "legalistic" Judaism as much as it is a radical channeling of longstanding Jewish belief in God's compassion for the marginalized. As the messianic emissary of this divine mission, Jesus inevitably elicits antagonism—eventually violent antagonism—from those invested in maintaining the status quo.

So the real epiphany of Mark 8:31 is not that Jesus' *mission* is to die, but that his faithfulness to God's healing mission will inevitably *result* in his death. In Mark, Jesus "must" die because his commitment to human healing will not falter. With two millennia of Holy Weeks under our belts, we can easily underestimate the power of this epiphany. Essentially, Mark is saying that the Son of God will not dial down his ministry to spare his own life, or even to ease his suffering. His commitment to the healing of humanity literally knows no limits. And neither—Easter tells us—does God's life-giving power.

It is not hard to see why Peter so quickly "rebukes" Jesus' prediction (verse 31). As noted above, Mark gives a rather straight-forward presentation of disciples captivated by hopes of earthly glory and therefore preoccupied more with Jesus' messianic *title* than his life-giving *mission*. Of course, the title "Messiah" is helpful for establishing Jesus' God-given authority. But that same title is dangerously specious when detached from Jesus' own counter-cultural mission on behalf of the broken and outcast. Mark would rather see people following Jesus unpretentiously in this mission, and actually participating in this holy work, than waving signs or posting memes in Jesus' name. So consequential is this point that Jesus calls Peter "Satan" for his self-serving confusion (verse 33)!

Interestingly, Peter does seem to understand something vital, namely that his own vocational future is wrapped up in, and defined by, the mission of Jesus. On that point he and Jesus agree. The question is whether Peter will embrace Jesus' definition of his own mission—which is the only definition that matters—and the consequences of that definition for his own vocation. This is the question over which the fellowship now begins to deteriorate and ultimately dissolves, as the disciples finally betray and abandon Jesus to his humiliating crucifixion (Mark 14:43-52, 66-72).

At the same time, Mark's audience most likely knows what Mark's narrative itself only promises, that the risen Jesus will re-gather his disciples and empower them for faithful mission in his name (13:9-10; 14:28; 16:7; see also 3:14-15; 6:7-13). In fact, given the standard dating of Mark (circa 70 CE), there is a good chance that both Mark and his early audiences knew about the martyrdom of James (circa 42-44 CE; see Mark 10:39; Acts 12:2) if not also the martyrdom of Peter (circa 64 CE; see John 21:18-19). These apostles were some of the first to epitomize Jesus' teaching on the cost of discipleship: denying themselves and taking up their crosses (verse 34), saving their lives by first losing it for the sake of the gospel (verse 35), seeing past the worldly shame of Jesus' crucifixion to the glory of his final appearance (verse 38).

Notice, however, that this is no longer a private conversation between Jesus and his inner circle. In verse 34, Jesus summons the surrounding crowd, eyeing the possibility of still more disciples. His repeated use of relative pronouns ("anyone," verse 34; "whoever," verse 35; "whoever," verse 38), while somewhat muted in

the NRSV, makes it clear that the cost of discipleship is not limited to an apostolic few. Anyone who purports to follow Jesus must understand the sacrifice involved. For Mark, discipleship is not some comfortable affiliation with Jesus but a life-changing—and potentially life-threatening—commitment to him.

It is a difficult message for today's preachers to appropriate. So much of North American Christianity—especially white Christianity—has been reduced to a comfortable affiliation with Jesus. Our tantrums against the specter of "relativism" hardly cloak the fact that there is little cost to our discipleship. Of course, some Christians are persecuted in certain parts of the world. Still, as preachers discern the relevance of this passage for today, they will do well to bear in mind that, for Mark at least, discipleship amounts to participation in Jesus' ministry. What makes the ministry of the Markan Jesus counter-cultural, and therefore the object of earthly hostility, is not that it is "Christian" per se but that it abides no impediment to the immediate restoration of the broken and outcast.

First Reading

Commentary on Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Justin Michael Reed

Does God have enough room for me too?

In Tim Rice's lyrics for the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Judas voices this painful insecurity as he asks "Does he [Jesus] love me too? Does he care for me?" As I read God's relationships with people in the stories of Genesis that lead up to this covenant in Genesis 17, I can imagine people sobbing like Judas on the brink of suicide as they ask these same questions.

When God looks with favor on Abel's offering, I imagine Cain's violent anger welling up from a deep longing to feel included (Genesis 4:5). When God first makes a promise to Abram that sets him on a journey to take possession of Canaan to the detriment of the native inhabitants, I can imagine the Canaanites in distress as they ask what fate God has in store for them (Genesis 12:6–7). When God shows a commitment to Abram's well-being and wealth in spite of the fact that he abandons his wife Sarai, I imagine Sarai asking "where do I fit into this divine promise?" (Genesis 12:10–20). When God assures Abram that his slave will not be his heir, I imagine Eliezer distraught over the fact that he must be pushed aside to make room for God's blessing (Genesis 15:2–4).

The book of Genesis was written by authors who identify with the Bronze Age patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons—who are treated as the ancestors of the Iron Age Israelites. Almost certainly, these ancient authors did not craft their stories expecting their audience to sympathize with the plight of those "others" who are auxiliary to the lineage of God's special promise. But I believe that being intentional about attending to these marginalized voices from the biblical text can make a world of difference in the lives of so many of God's children in the communities with whom we share these stories as the word of God.

The confirmation of God's ongoing promises to Abram forms the main focus of the narrative in Genesis 17. God re-affirms a promise to make a great nation through Abram's descendants and emphasizes the promise with a new name for the patriarch: Abraham (Genesis 17:2–7). But the context of this re-iterated

covenant contains laudable differences from the examples of the aforementioned "others" who suffer in the wake of God's partiality.

Within Genesis 17, we see that God explicitly names Sarai—who is crowned with the new name, Sarah—as the mother of nations and kings (Genesis 17:15–16). God makes it clear that there is no covenant without her. When Abraham asks about the fate of Ishmael, God makes it clear that this covenant through Sarah and Isaac does not disinherit Ishmael from an abundance of blessings (Genesis 17:18–20). And this entire chapter follows a profound story in which Hagar, an enslaved woman impregnated and abused by Abram and Sarai, encounters God in the wilderness and receives a promise of abundant descendants just like God's desire for human flourishing repeated in promises to the patriarchs (Genesis 16:10; see also Genesis 1:28; 8:17; 9:1, 7; 17:2; 22:17; 26:4, 24; 35:11).

These expressions of inclusiveness beyond God's narrow relationship with the male protagonist Abraham deserve to be celebrated for their message about God's blessings. Even as the book of Genesis focuses on androcentric and ethnocentric promises, God has room for promises to foremothers and lineages that branch away from the Israelites. These positive elements of the text should not blind us to the fact that some voices remain marginalized such as the Canaanites who are being disinherited (Genesis 17:8) and the female descendants of Abraham that cannot bear the sign of the covenant. In addition, Abraham's enslaved males who are circumcised do not actually partake in the blessing intended exclusively for Abraham's "seed" (Genesis 17:12). Given this tension, responsible readers should strike a balance between affirming the inclusions while also attending to the exclusions in the biblical text and churches.

As a final addendum, I would like to make a note about names. In one sense, the literal meaning of these Hebrew names can be important for supplementing the message in the story. For example, the name Abram can be translated as "exalted father," but the name change to Abraham, "father of multitudes," matches God's promise of many descendants for Abraham. (For Sarah the correlation between the name and the text is not as apparent: Sarai most likely means "my princess" and Sarah means "princess.")

In another sense beyond their meaning, these names deserve special attention because of how the practice of attending to names reflects our value system as readers. Making the effort to pronounce these Hebrew names in the way that they are actually written in Hebrew can show our respect for the characters in the Bible, the cultures that produced our sacred scripture, and our Jewish neighbors.

Psalm

Commentary on Psalm 22:23-31

Rolf Jacobson

A great debate (that nobody really cares about)

The psalm selection for the Second Sunday in Lent—nine verses that form the conclusion of Psalm 22—raises a question that became an intense debate among psalms scholars a few decades ago.

The question is whether these verses are spoken at the same moment in time as the desperate cries for help that form the rest of Psalm 22 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), or whether these verses were spoken either later in time or after a priest spoke words of promise in between verses 22 and

23.

It was an intense debate. But I can't find anybody in psalms studies who cares about that debate anymore. And I'll admit the truth—I never cared.

So why bring it up? Well, because the sudden turn in Psalm 22 from the desperate cries for help in 22:1-21a and the words of thanksgiving and praise that comprise 22:21b-31 is both unexpected and confusing. So much so that the Revised Common Lectionary essentially treats these verses as a separate psalm by selecting only the praise section to be read this week. And in effect, if Psalm 22:23-31 was a separate psalm, we would approach it as a psalm of praise and thanksgiving:

verse 23 The Call to Praise ("Praise him!…)
verse 24 The Reason for Praise ("For he did not despise….")
verses 25-31 Ongoing Praise of God

So here, we will treat this as a psalm of praise and thanksgiving following some dramatic experience of God's saving help.

The "who"

Typical of many praise psalms, this short section of praise begins by addressing a specific audience and inviting—even exhorting—them to praise the Lord.

Who is invited to praise? They are referred to in several interesting phrases, which form a compelling progression. Pay attention to how the "who" of the praise develops:

- "You who fear the Lord" (verse 23a—more literally, "O fearers of the Lord")
- "All offspring of Jacob" (verse 23b—more literally, "Every seed of Jacob")
- "All offspring of Israel" (verse 23c—"Every seed of Israel")
- "The great congregation" (verse 25a)
- "Those who seek the Lord" (verse 26b)
- "All the ends of the earth" (verse 27a)
- "All the families of the nations" (verse 27b)
- "All who sleep in the earth" (verse 29a—more literally, "all the ashes of the earth")
- "All who go down to the dust" (verse 29b)
- "Posterity" (verse 30a—literally, "seed")
- "Future generations" (verse 30b)
- "A people yet unborn" (verse 31)

Notice how the choir swells and swells, grows and grows, expands exponentially. It starts internally with just a few—those who "fear the Lord." I mean "internally" in two senses. First, that the emotion of "fearing the Lord" is a personal and internal matter. It is a squirrelly concept and its meaning is hard to pin down, but it is a decidedly personal and internal matter. Second, this is an internal group in the sense that it is a small group of insiders—the choir, quite literally.

The choir then expands to include "every seed [descendant] of Jacob" and "every seed of Israel." One wonders whether the explicit reference to Jacob/Israel should conjure up for the reader any narrative allusions either to his story (stealing a blessing, tricking a trickster, ending up down in Egypt)—or to the stories of his "seed" (Joseph, Judah, Dinah, Tamar's children, Benjamin). At the very least, the dual references to the people are inclusive in the sense that all of Jacob's descendants are included in the praise—as the prophet Joel might have it, "your sons and your daughters, your old men and young boys,

your male and your female servants." All of them together form "the great congregation." This growing choir is a big-tent choir. Conservatives, liberals, and moderates. Urban, rural, and wanderers. Teachers, students, and drop-outs. All God's children.

But then, in the expansive rhetoric of the psalm's poetry, the choir expands. It is not even just Israel, but "all who seek the Lord." Some Old Testament scholars believe that the terms "those who fear the Lord" and "those who seek the Lord" may intentionally refer to non-Israelites who have joined the great congregation (see Psalm 118:1-4). That sense is certainly implied here, as the expansive terms "all the ends of the earth" and "all the families of the nations" confirm. It isn't just descendants of Israel who are exhorted to praise the Lord; it is all living people from "every nation" (Hebrew: *goyim*).

Then, finally, in a flourish that as far as I know is unique to Psalm 22 in the Psalter, the psalmist says, "And it isn't even just the living, but the dead and those who are not yet born, too!" In the words of the NRSV translation, the psalmist calls "all who sleep in the earth" and "all who go down to dust" to praise the Lord.[1] That is, if the NRSV is right, the dead are called to join the eternal song. But not just the living and the dead, but also the not-yet-living: "posterity" and "future generations" and "a people yet unborn." Thus, the eternal song of praise envelops not just everyone everywhere, but also everywhen.

The "what"

And this, according to the psalm, is the ultimate purpose of praise—to bring the discordant and chaotic cacophony of a rebellious creation into relational harmony with the Lord, by bringing everyone's voice into musical harmony with the eternal song of Israel's praise. By praising God, we align our very selves with God. The song "trues" us to God.

And why is Israel's Lord the one who deserves our praise? Why bring ourselves into harmony with this Lord? "Because he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him" (verse 24).

Praise the Lord.

Notes

1. The Hebrew text here is corrupt and difficult to translate. It quite literally says something like, "All the ashes of earth eat and worship before him, all those who go down to dust bow down." Eugene Peterson renders the verse this way: "All the power-mongers are before him—worshiping! / All the poor and powerless, too—worshiping! / Along with those who never got it together—worshiping!" He takes the Hebrew as metaphorical language for the powerful and powerless. But in this rare case I disagree with Peterson. The wider context suggests that the psalmist is referring to both the living and the not-yet-living.

Second Reading

Commentary on Romans 4:13-25

Adam Hearlson

I find preaching from the epistolary literature of the New Testament difficult.

The narratives of scripture are most manageable. The presence of small details in a story is usually enough platform from which to launch. The wisdom literature is generally a fun exercise in homiletical impressionism—be poetic; the Psalmists were. The epistles feel like climbing a sheet of ice. I tend to need more preparation, more commentaries, and more conversation to feel ready to scale the wall. When I preach from the epistles, I first fetch my ice ax.

No sheet of ice is more intimidating than Paul's letter to the Romans. Like a sheet of ice, it is one single piece. The sustained argument makes understanding twelve verses from the fourth chapter and making them intelligible a challenge. A preacher would be wise to read the entire letter to ensure that they have a basic grasp of the argument preceding and following the passage. As with most of his letters, Paul assumes his audience had prior understandings that he never bothers to explain fully. Why would he explain what they already know, after all? To complicate things even further, the letter to the Romans interprets past events in Israel's history through a new axiomatic principle of Christ's death and resurrection. As Leander Keck puts it, the book of Romans is the culmination of Paul's "rethinking" of his own theology.[1] Romans is the divided spectrum of light of Paul's previous theology refracted through the prism of Christ.

In Romans 4, Paul is rethinking his theology of Abraham—which is a necessary step as he reviews faith at-large. Having already concluded in chapter one that "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" (1:17), Paul tries to explain how Christ relates to God's righteousness and the people's faith. Given Abraham's privileged place within Israel's identity, Paul examines Abraham's faith which led to belief without proof. Abraham believed in the promises of God without experiencing the fulfillment of those promises. Such belief was no easy task for Abraham and Sarah. Their childlessness and their odd sojourn in a foreign land ought to have been enough to dampen their faith in the God who called them from Ur. But, their faith held fast in the face of testing.

For Paul, faith is what leads to life, even amid death (verse 17). Such trust is not easy or straightforward. For Abraham, the paragon of faithfulness, faith was a struggle—it required a "hope against hope." A sermon discussing the complicated nature of faith, hope, and doubt might find some inspiration in Paul's discussion of Abraham. The inspiring idea that Abraham's faith and hope found mutual reinforcement in each other is enough fuel to get a preacher to Sunday.

Additionally, how Paul speaks of Abraham's faith as growing in strength holds promise for preaching. The NRSV translates *enedynamothe* as "grew strong." This translation, I think, fails to account for the passive nature of the verb. According to Paul, Abraham's faith didn't grow strong of his own accord, but was **made** strong—presumably by God.[2] What that strengthening of faith means as Paul (hyperbolically, I think) describes Abraham's unwavering trust in the promise continues to confound interpreters, especially in light of Abraham's laughter in Genesis 17. If I was preaching this sermon, I would sit with this point of scholarly contention for a bit. As with most preaching, places of most profound vexation provide some of the most profitable opportunities for imagination.

Paul concludes this short section by turning to the reader so that they know that the life of Abraham is relevant "for our sake" (verse 24). The faith of Abraham was not earned but given. This gift of faith thus manifests in Abraham's life as righteousness. So it is with righteousness within the burgeoning Christian community. The story of Abraham is likewise the story of the new Christian community—that is, all who can lay claim to being a "seed" of Abraham.

We get to verse 24 of the chapter before we hear the first mention of Christ. Christ—and the events of his life, death, and resurrection—is the content of the faith that leads to righteousness. Paul is aware that Christ

was not the content of Abraham's faith but explains that the eternal God is the animating force behind both the faith **and** the subsequent righteousness in Abraham and the community. Therefore, the power inherent within faith is not innate to the believer but a product of the gospel laden with God's power as it meets human existence. This conclusion can be a freeing one to those congregations who still believe that their lives will find worth and power in the length of their reach. Paul clarifies (sort of, it is Romans after all) that measuring God's faithfulness is always a more productive use of our imagination than measuring our own.

Notes

1. Leander Keck, *Romans, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 33-36.
2. Ibid, 131.