

The Crazy Idea
A Sermon on Mark 8:31-38 by the Rev. Philip Major
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After hearing today's Gospel, you might be asking, "Is this the same Jesus who spoke words of forgiveness and mercy?" *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* Why does Jesus respond with such anger, here in Mark 8? What does this passage have to do with our lives?

To understand, let's begin with the verses leading up to today's passage. In the section leading up to verse 31 Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They gave their various responses. Then *Jesus asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' and he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.* Peter is the most extroverted, the most vocal of the disciples. We see this especially in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Peter is the one who says what everyone else is thinking: Jesus is the Messiah.

Then *Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.* Once again, Peter is the disciple who says what everyone else is thinking. "Are you crazy? Have you lost your mind?"

The important word here is rebuke. In the original language, which I promise you was not English, the word translated as 'rebuke' means exorcise, as in 'to exorcise a demon'. Peter took Jesus aside and attempted to exorcise the evil spirits, or the craziness, out of him.

This word, translated as 'rebuke' or 'exorcise', has played a central role in Mark. There are many instances where Jesus exorcises an evil spirit from a person who is acting crazy. The tables were turned in chapter 3. A large group of followers had followed Jesus back to his hometown. The people in Nazareth thought Jesus was possessed by an evil spirit. Members of Jesus' family came out of their homes and attempted to restrain him, for, as Mark 3: 21 says, the people of Nazareth were saying, "He has gone out of his mind!"

Why do Jesus' disciples and family members think he is losing his mind? What is he saying and doing that seems crazy to his friends and family? You had to be there, back in 1st century Judea, to understand.

The world of the New Testament was different from our world in the most important ways. It was a world where social, economic, and gender divisions were rigid. From the time of his birth, Jesus was constantly breaking down these divisions. As an infant he was visited by wise men from distant lands, and yet he was born to a relatively poor, unwed mother.

In his actions Jesus was crossing the boundaries that separated women from men and Samaritans from Jews. This disturbed the people who were watching, including his disciples. They said, "Why were you talking with her?" Jesus' actions disturbed the religious authorities because he did not obey the purity laws that separated people into different groups based on their religious practices. They said, "See, this man eats with sinners," in other words, with people whose hands are unclean.

Jesus broke barriers with stories like the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Jesus was breaking barriers when he told his disciples, 'Let the little children come to me.' Jesus broke barriers when he affirmed that Mary's rightful place was sitting with the men, engaged in the conversation, not acting as a servant of the men.

All of this was deeply troubling to the religious authorities of Jesus' time. The men who had positions like bishops and priests in the Temple thought Jesus was dangerous and out of his mind. The situation was made worse by the enormous crowds of people flocking to see him and hear his every word.

Jesus' dismantling of the barriers that separate God's people was also threatening to the authorities of the Roman Empire. Roman rule was extremely oppressive for most of the various groups in the Empire: the poor, the women and the men, the Samaritans and the Jews. Roman rule was oppressive for the people

of all of the Roman provinces, Egypt and Arabia, Judea and Syria, Capadocia and Galatia. The Roman Empire exercised strict controls over the people.

Today we can travel to Rome and see the magnificent triumphal arches built in the first century. Just remember that all of these grand, magnificent constructions and the massive, brutal Roman army were paid for by people who did not always have enough money to buy food for their families.

In order to prevent rebellion, the Roman authorities did everything in their power to keep people divided in separate groups. They schemed to get the people to be afraid of their neighbors and to be in a state of perpetual conflict with people from other groups. One example of this occurred in Rome in the year 64. Fire swept through the city, destroying more than two out of every three buildings. The Romans blamed the Jews, including a small group of Jews who were followers of Christ, for the fire. This led to the deaths of hundreds of Jews by crucifixion and torture. I'm guessing the Roman soldiers didn't have to do the dirty work of going to the Jewish neighborhood and dragging away the offenders. Mobs of people, angry with the Jews for the burning of their homes, did the work for them.

Roman soldiers were feared by the people, as they enforced brutal punishments on entire communities for any perceived violations. Four weeks from today, on Palm Sunday, we will be shocked and saddened by the story of the torture and crucifixion of Jesus. In order to understand what is happening in today's Gospel passage we have to understand that torture and crucifixion by the Roman authorities was a common punishment. Jesus was crucified on a hill on the outside of the city which was called 'Golgotha', which means, the place of the skull. Hundreds of others had been crucified in that same place, to strike terror in the hearts of the people of Jerusalem. The cruelty was the point.

With all of this in mind, let me tell my version of the story of Jesus' prediction of his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. *Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man would live and die in a way that was familiar to the people of Judea. Like many of them, he would be accused falsely, and undergo great suffering, and receive no support in his struggle against the injustices of the empire from the religious authorities. Like many who challenged the oppressive rule of the empire, the Son of Man would be killed. But this would not be the end of the story. After three days he would rise from the grave.*

The disciples were filled with terror to hear Jesus say these words. If Jesus was arrested and put to death, what would become of them? Peter said the words everyone else was thinking. Peter took Jesus aside and said, 'You are talking like a crazy man. Have you gone out of your mind?'

Then Jesus turned and looked at the group of disciples and asked, 'Is this what all of you are thinking? That I am losing my mind?' Jesus rebuked Peter and said, 'You are saying the words of the evil one. Don't you understand? They are trying to keep us divided. Division and terror are the way of the Roman empire, and it is the way of men. God's way is not the way of fear and division. God's way is not the way where the powerful protect themselves as the common people are suffering.'

This is the crazy idea Jesus is bringing into the world: resistance to those who use fear and violence to keep God's people divided from one another. The powers of the empire are doing everything they can to keep the people divided, afraid of each other, and fighting with each other. In his fear, Peter is falling into the trap the Romans have laid.

We see these same tactics of fear, violence and cruelty being used in the world around us. The people of Central America were filled with terror by the violence and brutality of the death squads. The people of Russia are terrified, unable to lay a flower at the memorial for Alexei Navalny for fear of being thrown into prison. In the United States of America our representatives in Congress are facing threats of violence. In the United States of America in 2024 judges and prosecutors have to have 24 hour security for themselves and their family members. For those who seek to divide us, fear, violence, and cruelty is the point.

Strengthened by God's love and grace, continue in God's way, which is resistance against threats of violence and civil war. God's way is overcoming our fears in order to be united with people who are different from us. God's way is being willing to give something up for the sake of being together as God's family.