

“What Kind of Messiah, God and Faith?”

Mark 8:27-38

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The August 17 issue of *National Geographic* included a story entitled “Meet Five Men Who Think They’re the Messiah.” They hail from all over the world – South Africa, Siberia, Zambia, Japan and Brazil. They have different messages of ecological concern, political interest and apocalyptic judgment. And they have varied numbers of followers ranging from just forty to thousands. But they all self-identify as the Messiah, some as Jesus himself.

It seems bizarre to us, not just that someone would self-identify in this way, but that other people, sometimes many other people, would believe them. But we know from the political world that unlikely figures can gather a following and there have always been multiple Messiah figures, even in Jesus’ day, and there have always been multiple understandings as to what the role involves, which helps us understand the exchange between Jesus and Peter in today’s reading from Mark 8.

As he is headed to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples who other people say he is. They list a number of names they have heard – John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. Then, he asks them who they say he is. It is a straightforward question and a significant one. Peter, as is often the case, speaks first. “You are the Messiah,” he says, but while in Matthew’s version of this story Jesus praises him for this response, in Mark’s he orders him to tell no one!

It is a part of what scholars call the messianic secret. In this and some other Gospel stories, Jesus tries to hide his identity, which seems contrary to our calling to tell the world who he is. But his concern lies in the fact that people have different expectations about who the Messiah is and thus there is a potential for misunderstanding.

The dominant Jewish expectation is of a warrior king who comes to deliver the people from foreign oppression. There are nuances to this idea by the first century. For example, the Essenes at Qumran expect a

royal messiah, a priestly messiah and a prophet (*Mark*, Smyth and Helwys Commentary, R. Alan Culpepper, p. 270). But the bottom line is that most people expect a deliverer in the real-world political sense, not what Jesus does through a cross. They have access to the suffering servant passages from Isaiah, one of which we have read today, in addition to other teachings about a righteous sufferer (Wisdom of Solomon 2:12-20 and 4 Maccabees 6 and 17), but they do not connect these teachings with the role of Messiah, as we do with Jesus.

Peter stands with the majority in his time. After he says Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus orders him to tell no one, Jesus goes on to say that he will suffer, be killed and then rise again after three days. It is the first of three passion predictions in Mark, none of which the disciples seem to get, but at this point Peter blows a gasket. “No way!” says, in the effect. Literally the text says he “rebukes” Jesus, *epitiman* in the Greek, the same term which describes what Jesus does to demons.

Peter rebukes Jesus and then Jesus rebukes Peter and says, “Get behind me Satan!” which seems stern, but Jesus explains, “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” What Peter is looking for in a Messiah is what everyone is looking for, help with a problem, freedom from foreign oppression. It just isn’t what God has in mind. It’s not that God doesn’t care about their predicament. It’s that God has something bigger in mind – the salvation of the world!

Now, the truth is all of this sounds familiar to those of us who have been in church most of our lives. We have studied this text before, we have heard a number of sermons on it. Peter is expecting the wrong kind of Messiah, he should have known better, but Jesus sets him straight. We get all of that. It’s not exactly earth-shattering news.

But as we reflect upon this story and consider our thoughts and feelings, we have to wonder - are we really all that different from Peter? What kind of Messiah do we want and thus what kind of God, and what are the implications for our faith? I’m not talking about the churchy answers we give to these questions, but how we really feel deep down.

We know the correct answers to give in church. Jesus dies for our sins, he is our savior in a spiritual sense; God is the one who directs our

lives, we don't demand things from God; and faith is about following Jesus, not being guaranteed our every whim. But like Peter, sometimes we need things that seem reasonable for God to provide. Sometimes we want a Messiah who brings healing for a loved one, justice for the oppressed, rain where there has been drought and an end to hurricanes... Sometimes we want a faith that gives us something tangible.

Peter just wants to be free from Roman oppression. Is that desire unreasonable? We just want certain basic things. If God is still God, why can't we have them?

It is possible to have unreasonable expectations, as Harold Kushner illustrates with two stories in his book *Who Needs God* (pp. 145-146). In the first, a nun describes the home in which she was raised. Her mother had a vigil light and a statue of St. Anthony. When she didn't get what she wanted, she would blow out the light and turn St. Anthony to the wall. When she did, back he'd come and she'd light the candle.

In the second, a man in Florida gave a large sum of money to a church after the minister preached a sermon on the text, "Cast thy bread upon the waters (Ecclesiastes 11:1)," promising people that if they gave generously, God would reward them tenfold. This man's business did not prosper. So, he sued the minister for false preaching!

Kushner goes on to say that we tend to think that for religion to work, for our prayers to be answered, we should get what we ask for; that is, he says, we have confused God with Santa Claus.

So, we can demand too much, but sometimes our requests aren't unreasonable. We just want a God who can help us, a Messiah who can deliver us, a faith that makes a difference in the real world. And God does help us, just not always in the ways we expect; Jesus does deliver us, just not on our terms; and faith does make a difference, but by changing us, not the world in which we live.

Mostly God helps us by being with us in our struggles and laying down life for us. This is what the cross is about. Alfred North Whitehead said that God is the fellow sufferer who understands. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that only a suffering God can help us. Fortunately for us, this is the way God chooses to work - not by reaching down and magically fixing everything, wiping out all evil like some

Arnold Schwarzenegger character, but by entering this world as one of us, identifying with our every experience and sacrificing all for us.

Large-scale events like the hurricane that has moved through our state certainly challenge this model. Can't God do something about these events? Why do they happen, not scientifically but theologically? There are no easy answers to such questions, but I recall the counsel of CBF field personnel Eddy and Cindy Ruble, then serving in Indonesia when the tsunami in the Indian Ocean took nearly a quarter of a million lives in 2004. They said we have to set aside the question of why, which we cannot answer, and move on to the question of what now - what can we do in response? That is the question and the answer lies in working with the God who always shows up when people are hurting.

We might want a God who fixes everything, but God chooses to work in a different way, not by power and coercion, but by mercy and love. This is why Jesus tells Peter not to spread the word that he is the Messiah, because people will think this means something it does not. This is why Jesus rebukes Peter for opposing his teaching about suffering. The Messiah, at least this Messiah, works in a different way.

In his book *The Wounded Healer* Henri Nouwen references a legend found in the Talmud about the Messiah (pp. 81-82).

Rabbi YOSHUA ben LEVI came upon ELIJAH the prophet while he was studying at the entrance of Rabbi SIMERON ben YOHAI's cave... He asked ELIJAH, "When will the Messiah come?"

ELIJAH replied, "Go and ask him yourself."

"Where is he?"

"Sitting at the gates of the city."

"How shall I know him?"

"He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.'"

That is how the Messiah works.

But the challenging nature of this text is found not just in a different way of viewing God and the Messiah, but in the implications these different views have for our faith, for Christian discipleship. For Jesus doesn't stop with a prediction of his suffering and death and thus the heads-up that he is a different kind of Messiah. He goes on to say that everyone who wants to be a disciple of his will follow this same pattern. They will deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him.

It is a familiar teaching, but one we do our best to avoid or water down so much it isn't really the same teaching. I mean, surely Jesus doesn't mean this literally. This sounds like the leader of a cult group, inviting followers to die. Is this Jesus or Jim Jones? At the very least, we must interpret this verse to mean dying to self and selfish ways. But if we are not careful, we will strip the teaching of all meaning.

I may have told some of you about a slip I made during a dress rehearsal for the musical *Godspell*. It was the scene in which a woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus and playing his role, I said that whoever was without sin should cast the first stone. The other characters all stopped, put down their stones and walked away, at which point I looked at the woman and said, "Has no one condoned you?" The other actors tried to restrain their laughter, but realizing what I had said, I continued, "Nor do I condone you. Go and sin no more."

Fortunately, it was just a dress rehearsal, but we are tempted to do something like this with Jesus' teaching about the cross. Will Campbell noted that Jesus did not say, "Take up your cross and relax," but he might just as well have, given our aversion to this text. One author put it this way. "The notion that there is a way to Easter other than through the pain and rejection of Good Friday continues to be offered as good common sense. Religion should help to protect people from conflict and provide a solid set of values for successful living, so the logic goes. Positive thinkers see the cross, both Jesus' and ours, as obstacles to be overcome, not as a necessary piece of the divine plan which leads to resurrection (Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching*, p. 513)."

It is appropriate to interpret Jesus' teaching, but not to explain it away. For he really is headed to his death and what he asks of his followers is that we be willing to give up something vital if our loyalty

to him and to the Gospel requires it. This might be our life. We think of people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bishop Oscar Romero who gave their lives for the Gospel. We think also of first responders and ordinary citizens risking their lives for others throughout our state right now. Or it might be something less dramatic but still of critical importance. For example, Clarence Jordan and the others who started an intentional interracial community called Koinonia Farm in rural Georgia in the 1940's sacrificed much in the way of their reputation and standing in the community, even their financial wellbeing. But is there something vital, anything significant, we are willing to sacrifice?

Nike's controversial new commercial with Colin Kaepernick includes this phrase – Believe in something... even if it means sacrificing everything. No matter how we feel about the commercial and Kaepernick, it is a provoking assertion not that far from the Gospel. Is there anything we believe in enough for which to sacrifice everything?

The good news is we are not talking about sacrificing just for the sake of sacrificing, but for Christ and the Gospel. And the even better news is that when we do this, we get back more in return not just in the way of eternal life but in knowing we are doing what God wants us to do. Those who want to save their life will lose it, Jesus says, and those who lose their life for his sake and the sake of the Gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? What indeed?

So, what kind of Messiah do we want, what kind of God and what sort of faith? Like Peter, we may at first want things to play out on our terms, but we know how that goes most of the time. Maybe it's time to do it God's way, allow Jesus to be the kind Messiah he is and be the kind of people we are called to be, people willing to lay down our lives in love for one another.