

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16 (p. 12)

FEBRUARY 25, 2018

MARK 8:27-38 (p. 820)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Bless us Father, please, this very moment. Fill us with the power and presence of your Holy Spirit—with wonder and awe! Surround us with your joy, even as we offer this prayer. And grant us, each one of us, wisdom and knowledge and understanding as we study your Word today. For we ask these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“I’VE GOT IT ALL FIGURED OUT”

Jesus and His Disciples are in Roman territory, for the first time in Mark's Gospel, I might add! Prior to this they have been in Galilee--Jewish territory, an area controlled by Rome, but Jewish none-the-less! Now they're just across the border—out on the margins, in the region of Caesarea Philippi, it says. They are in what we call today the Golan Heights, in the north-eastern corner of modern-day Israel, right on the edge of Lebanon and Syria—just a few miles west, actually, of where ISIS and Syria and Russia and Iran are wreaking havoc right now! When slowly, Jesus turns to His Disciples and asks, “Who do people say I am”? ...It's an interesting question, don't you think? One with profound ramifications.

Mark shifts his focus here in chapter eighth. Up until now we see Jesus moving around quite a bit, traveling from town to town, teaching and preaching and healing, going back and forth across the lake even! But now, in the middle of the Gospel, all that changes as Jesus zeros in on Jerusalem.

Mark doesn't name the destination yet, not for a couple more chapters. But his words start to change. Mark uses phrases like "on the way" or "on the road" when describing their location now. This is a journey! And "along the road" several important things take place! The context is important. It always is. But Jesus' question is even more so! "Who do people say I am"? Do you know? "Some say John the Baptist," they reply, "and some say Elijah or one of the Prophets". Then Jesus turns up the heat considerably! "Okay," He says, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Imagine being there! I picture everyone starting to squirm a bit, as they look down at their sandals and shuffle their feet. Then they all turn towards Peter, the brash ringleader for the little group, waiting for him to speak on their behalf! And after a very uncomfortable moment or two, he finally does—making a bold statement of faith that will ring down through the ages; "You are the Christ—the Messiah—the Anointed One of God!"

And that settles it, right! For us I mean. It's a good answer! And we are good with it! We know the end of the story too, so we've got this Jesus thing all figured out! You are the Messiah, the Son of God. And because we know that, we know who God is too! We have it all figured out, answers on top of answers! We know, for instance, that God is love, so He smiles all the time, and is happy all the time! And what's more, God wants us to smile all the time too, and be happy all the time! ...Or maybe not! Maybe God is scary! Maybe all that talk about justice and wrath twists your stomach into knots when you think about God? You've got it all figured out, all right, and God scares the hell right out of you!

But you do have it all figured out, don't you? It's settled! You know exactly who God is, and exactly how God will respond, in any given situation! You know how God will react to the mess around you, and how God will react to the mess within you! You've got it down! ...Okay, that's a little melodramatic! But God is predictable, right. You can always count on His next move! You at least have that much figured out? God is safely tucked away in a nice, neat little box!

Every three years the Lectionary brings us this text from Mark. So, every three years, when it does, I ask a friend of mine to join us at church. Some of you have met him before. He's an entertainer by trade, and dresses the part. So, at first, he might appear a little "strange". But trust me, he also moonlights as a part-time theologian! And after sitting with him for a while, you will realize that he has an uncanny way of explaining deep, theological thoughts—simple, and yet profound—especially when it comes to our heart-felt beliefs about God! By the way, his given name is Jack (**Jack in the Box**).

The first thing that Jack teaches us is; if we do our part, then God will do His! And we are clear on what those parts are, right! If we faithfully turn the crank, round and round, we can count on God responding on cue! It's all very predictable! And we rejoice in theological predictability! We like everything about the Creator of Heaven and Earth all neat and tidy! We don't mind taking extra time and energy to get it that way either! If we can just get the Clown stuffed down into the box, then everything works! It's okay even that we have to fold down all the loose edges, and keep a constant hold with one hand,

while pushing down with the other! When it comes to God, things just have to fit!
The effort is worth it in the end, right, just as long as you can shut the lid! Because once you do, you are set! Once that top is securely fastened into place, Jack is not going to jump out when you don't expect Him to! You're the one in control now! You've got Him right inside your little box! All you have to do is turn the crank, just like you were taught, and maybe dance or sway to the music, and Voila! ...Again, I'm being a bit melodramatic! But isn't it also true?

You can turn the crank fast or slow if you want to. That's up to you! And in a panicky situation you can frantically twist it round and round just as fast as you possibly can! You're in charge now. Remember! You've got the whole thing figured out! Sure, the music sounds a little "tinny" at times. And the volume could always be louder! But there are no more surprises, right! That happy guy, or that scary guy, or that whatever guy will come on the scene at just the right moment, and only at the right moment, and in all the prescribed ways, and exactly as you think he should, right! ...It's all good! ...There is just one problem! ...A Clown Theology, ain't Jack!

At the very beginning of his Gospel, Mark clearly states who Jesus is. "This is the beginning of the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as predicted by the Prophet Isaiah!" Which theologically speaking, means, Jesus is so close to God, as much a part of God, that He and God are One! And then, just to make sure we didn't miss that announcement, Mark goes on for seven chapters sharing one miraculous moment after the next, explaining what that proclamation really means!

Jesus is the Majestic One, the Divine One, the One who commands the wind and the waves! He's the One who miraculously provides bread for the hungry—the One who commands demons to be silent! Couple that with all of the Old Testament Prophecies concerning the Anointed One of God, and Peter couldn't help but have this Messiah thing pegged! Who wouldn't have made the Good Confession in answer to Jesus' pivotal question; "Who do people say I am?" ...And who wouldn't, when Jesus asks; "Who do you say that I am?" along with Peter answer, "You are the Christ, of course, the Son of the Living God!" ...Only what does that mean? ...What do you think Peter's expectations were when he said that? What are yours? ...What were Peter's beliefs? What are yours? Remember, Jesus wants you to answer the question!

For hundreds and hundreds of years, except for a brief period long before Peter was ever born, his nation has been under the oppressive rule of foreign governments. First it was the Persians (modern-day Iran), then the Greeks, and now the Romans. It was thought by many that Messiah would come as a Conquering King, from the line of David, and would sit on David's throne forever! Many were looking for Him to throw off the yoke of slavery and free the people!

Others though, were looking to the Old Testament Prophecies, convinced that Elijah would appear before God's Final Judgment at the End of Time. They thought that's who Messiah was! And knowing their Bible, that's how they believed Jesus should act! Still other believed that Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead! A fiery warning of

repentance is what they expected Him to preach!

“Who do people say I am,” asks Jesus! “Who do you say that I am?” How would you answer that? How do you answer that? You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God? But what exactly does that mean? What are your expectations for the Messiah, your beliefs, your desires? We talk a lot about “following” Jesus as Lord, about being a Disciple of Christ! But can you articulate what that looks like? What is the lay of the land? Where is your leader taking you? Do you have it all figured out?

Right in the middle of this encounter with Peter and the Disciples, Jesus says that the Son of Man must suffer, many things—that He will be rejected by the Elders and Chief Priests, and Teachers of the Law, by all the religious leaders—that He’ll be killed by government officials, and then, after three days rise again! He spoke “plainly” about this, it says, not in parables or complicated twists of speech! He made it clear for all of us, crystal clear in fact! But Peter, not wanting any part of that piece of the plan, takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him!

Have you ever rebuked Jesus? Have you ever argued with Him, or simply ignored Him? You know, because you didn’t want to hear what He had to say? To rebuke someone means to “warn them strongly” or even “punish them”. “No way Jesus, that’s not what I had in mind! If that’s what you think we are going to do, then you have another thing coming!” It’s kind of harsh, isn’t it? And certainly foolish! And look how Jesus responds! Mark tells us that Jesus, in turn, started rebuking Peter! “Get behind me Satan! You don’t have in mind the things of God, but the things of men!”

They say that confession is good for the soul. So, I have to tell you, when I was young I read this as “get lost Peter, you’re obviously filled with evil!” I thought I had it all figured out! Only that’s not what Jesus says, at all! He didn’t tell Peter to get lost. He said, “Get behind me”. What if He meant, get back in line Peter, you need to follow some more? I mean the very next thing that Jesus does in this exchange is call the crowd together, along with the Disciples, and explains to them all that “whoever wants to be my Disciple must deny themselves, take up their Cross, and follow me!” What does that say?

“Deny yourself”! What does that mean? It’s the same Greek word used in Luke 22:34 when Peter is standing around the campfire as Jesus stands before Pilate. Remember, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me!” Deny means to disown, or disregard. Peter states that he has no connection with Jesus at all, in order to save his own skin! Deny yourself, Jesus says. We need to deny ourselves!

Those are the only two times this word is used in the entire New Testament; Peter denying Jesus, and Jesus saying we must deny ourselves! Whoever wants to be my Disciple, truly desires to follow me, must first set aside their own interests, and focus on the interests of God! Whoever wants to find life, for my sake, and the sake of the Gospel, must stop focusing on what they want. Deny themselves. And instead, focus on what God wants! That’s huge, isn’t it, and not something we usually want to hear! ...Did you have that part figured out?

The next part of the equation is to “Take up your Cross”. I see multiple dimensions here. One is to take up the daily crosses that will naturally come our way. Normal suffering and problems are simply part of the human experience! So, we need to deal with them, and in the way that Jesus would deal with them! But those things happen to everyone, every day!

Could another aspect of “Taking up your Cross” then, be to grasp hold of the one that God has laid before you—to lean into, to actively choose to carry out the ministry that God wants you to do! Forget trying to find the biggest Cross you can find! Forget searching for a Cross like everyone else carries, or a little one that’s easy to shoulder! Instead, seize the Cross that The Lord has placed before you, whatever that Cross may be, and wherever that Cross may lay, and then carry it to the best of your ability!

The last part of the formula, says Jesus, “is to follow me”. Do what I do. Go where I go. Figure out what that is, and then get in line behind me and do it, because we are carrying Good News to a troubled world! Don’t do what it is you want to do! And don’t avoid wherever it is I place before you. Just step out in faith! Just step up in love! Just follow me!

Maybe Peter thought he had it all figured out? And maybe his confession convinced him that he was ready to go it alone? I mean he was a long-time believer, after all, Jewish by birth. He had The Lord in a nice, neat theological box, and was ready to close the lid.

Peter had attended Synagogue since he was a child, traveled with his family up to Jerusalem on all the High Holy Days, Worshipped at the Temple!

Peter knew the Law. He understood the message of the Prophets! Peter knows the history and the traditions, all the right things to do and say! He has even given up fishing to travel with Jesus for awhile, at least when he thought he knew where they were going! Peter, like most of us Peters, has it all figured out! So, he is just cranking away as the music plays on! But then Jesus decides to jump out of the box!

God does that you know, tends to surprise us. Can you imagine being an eighty-year old farmer, like Moses, and hearing God say, "I want you to go to Egypt and set my people free"? Can you imagine being Abraham at ninety-nine, and God telling you that He is about to fulfill His promise to you, and make you the father of a great nation! It's Taco Tuesday in the hot Arizona sun, and you are sitting around the shuffleboard courts when you get the news. "I know you are retired," says the Lord, "and Medicare probably won't cover it, but you are going to have a son!" You'd laugh too, wouldn't you? ...Can you imagine being Sarah, as you are wheeled from the Geriatric Ward to the Maternity Ward, wondering how the Pack-n-Play is going to fit under the card table at Bridge Club! ...The lid just flew off of her Theological Box, didn't it! Can you imagine?

How sure are you, that you have it all figured out? How open are you, how receptive are you, to what God is saying to you right here and now? Jesus is speaking plainly! "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his Cross and follow me." ...Maybe we don't have it all figured out quite yet. Maybe we don't need to?

However, we do know enough to step out, onto the road, and begin the journey of following Jesus, don't we! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Silently Lord, we kneel before you in prayer. Quietly and humbly Lord, we open up our hearts to you. We know that you hear our every sigh, and that you listen for our deepest needs. You feel our every ache and pain, and your heart is always in tune with ours. But please, in this time of prayer, make our hearts in tune with yours as well.

Thank you for listened to the stirrings within us Lord, during this quiet time of prayer. Thank you for searching our hearts and our minds, and for discovering the dark and fearful places within. Thank you for hearing our voiced concerns Lord, as well as our silent ones, and for accepting our praise as a symphony to your Glory. Thank you also Lord, for listening to our melody of prayer on behalf of our dearly beloved. Please, Lord, pour out your Holy Spirit on them right now. We lift up

Please bless each of these lives with health and comfort. Bless each of their spirits with your Spirit. Shower grace on their world, and fill their hearts with peace and love. And please, grant wisdom and guidance to each and all. For together, Lord, we place these loved ones into your care.

Father, we ask for your blessings on our lives as well. We too need your abundant love and your omnipotent guidance. We too need your peace and your support, and most of all your Spirit Lord, poured out upon our lives! Equip us now, please, and motivate us to faithfully do your will. And strengthen us for the days ahead, and all that we will face.

Help each one of us Lord, to see your face, to recognize your smile, and to sense the loving embrace of your arms around us! And help us to make you proud of all the things

we say and do! We ask this, Lord, in the Name of our Risen Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ! And we pray together now the very prayer that He has taught us, saying...