

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.12.21

Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. ⁵The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. ⁶I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ⁷The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; ⁸he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. ⁹It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He 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.

Then he began to teach them 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 him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (449)

Repentance, let’s remember, is a change of mind. And, get ready, because I’m going to ask you to change yours. Again. I’m going to ask you again.

I’ve preached this sermon before because it’s not so easy a thing, to change your mind, to change your thinking.

I had a friend when I was young who was smart and beautiful and talented, but she didn’t know it. She’d taken a lot of abuse from her father, which made her convinced of her own worthlessness.

Once, when we were older, each in college, and she was over at my house during summer break, she commented on her wandering path. Dismissive of herself, she'd attended a few colleges, quit, transferred, started again. Her grades were low. She never got any footing in the material.

My own father was there overhearing. She admitted she never really even tried, never did any of the reading, was always faking her way to all those C's, D's.

"Proof of your intelligence," my dad said something like.

His unexpected participation had us both listen. My friend especially wanted to know more.

"You get a C on a paper about a book you didn't read?" Dad said, still not seeing how fully my friend was listening. "I had to try *hard* to get C's," he said, which is true.

It utterly changed my friend's self-understanding, for that moment at least.

But that change in self-understanding—that she was in fact smart, is in fact smart and worthy; it didn't seem to last long. It's hard to hold onto such transformed thought, such changed mind, such repentance.

Repentance is a practice, a process. To change your mind: that's a discipline.

So, I've preached this sermon before. I'll preach it again because it asks of us transformed thought—repentance, which is to say *metanoia*, transformed mind, transformed thinking. But it's hard to hold onto transformed thought. It takes new patterns, new disciplines.

I'll preach it again also because here we are again with Jesus as he first talks of his own suffering, his own death. This turn in his path from a wandering ministry of healing and restoring, from a wandering ministry of making present the reign of God, to a more pointed walk to Jerusalem, to the cross: it's a turn that's told of in all three synoptic gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all remember Jesus to have made such a pivot, from wonderworker to suffering servant—such a servant as Isaiah prophesied of half a millennium before Christ. This means we hear of this pivot, from wandering wonderworker to convicted suffering servant, in all three liturgical years, Year A, Year B, and Year C—this very moment of Jesus speaking of his own suffering as if he were himself such a suffering servant, then Peter rebuking Jesus, then Jesus rebuking Peter.

But it's so crucial a moment that we actually hear it *twice* a year. Once early in Lent it's the gospel text, when the path of the church year has us move from the season of Epiphany following Christmas, with Jesus incarnate getting started in the world and having his early, marvelous effect, to the season of Lent as preparation for Holy Week, when the cross starts to loom as the way this whole thing will end. (Or will it?) Then we hear it again in mid-Pentecost, now, when summer

turns to fall; we hear it as the pivotal point in Jesus' ministry, also a pivotal point in this longest of the liturgical seasons, this year 26 weeks long, this the 16th week.

The cross. That Jesus must suffer, 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—which is quite the issue in Mark's gospel. Things said openly, things to be kept secret, things to be kept secret yet spoken of, things to be proclaimed yet kept quiet out of fear: this is quite the issue in Mark's gospel, right on up to Resurrection morn, when the man in the tomb told the women that Jesus wasn't there, that he'd gone ahead to Galilee, that there the disciples would see him, which they should go tell them.

But they told nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

And yet here we have the story, so word got out somehow.

And maybe that's it: God's word will get out somehow. It's God's word after all, so we can trust it ever to speak or to hold silence until it's time.

As for this, 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. But then Peter told him to shut up. He took Jesus aside and told him to shut up, the verb *epitimaō*.

Of course, Jesus would tell Peter the same thing right back: "You shut up!" the same verb, *epitimaō*, which is, to this point, a verb used a lot in this gospel. Mark uses it in Jesus' shutting up the impure spirit in the synagogue back in Nazareth. He uses it in Jesus telling all the impure spirits who recognize him along the way to shut up about their calling him the Son of God. Mark uses it in naming what Jesus did to the storm on the lake when he was trying to sleep in the bow of the boat, that the storm, having awoken him, should shut up. "Rebuke" is often how it's translated, but it's a rough verb—*epitimaō*. It probably landed in the hearing of those first hearers of the gospel more the way we would now hear, "Shut up!"

Which means it sounds more Markan. Mark's gospel should be viscerally heard, viscerally felt. After all, Mark's understanding of Jesus isn't as someone who should be thought about and understood, but as someone who should be felt, immediately felt, even roughly felt. Jesus doesn't come with good news that will fit easily within our world. Jesus comes with good news that disrupts everything about our world—for everything of the world deemed good is actually more like "good enough." And Jesus wouldn't stand for "good enough."

Disruption! Like, here's a dumb example, we Goodmans are about to get our kitchen renovated. This means all those cupboards that we can now but hardly open, so broken are the knobs, so off are the hinges, will be fixed, will be made new. And I'm looking forward to the end result. I'm looking forward to being able simply to reach for a coffee cup without having a whole wall tremble. But the process of getting there is going to be disruptive. I really haven't figured out how we're going to manage it.

Mark's take on Jesus would have us understand him as coming into the world in such a way and with such an aim that everything trembles. Everything—to the foundations of the world, trembling to be made new.

And it's for this that it can be said that Jesus *must* undergo great suffering. It's for this: Jesus *must* die because powerful people will object to his mission of filling the world with God's healing love, and yet he would not sway from this mission, which means he must die.

I'll say it again, this sermon that I've preached before, many times before, this which I just said in the previous sentence because it's this that we must learn, which means unlearning so much to the contrary: Jesus will die because powerful people invested in the status quo will be frightened and offended by his mission of filling the world, as he himself was filled, with God's utter and immediate presence, so they will kill him. He knew this would be the result if he kept at it, and he would keep at it, so he must die.

This is the "must" of it, this and only this.

But, no, you dig back into your theological calculations. No, his suffering was a requirement of some sort. Right? It was some requirement on God's part. God required Jesus to be sacrificed in order for God's wrath at our sinfulness to be quenched. Right?

No. Wrong. Such a calculation isn't strictly scriptural, and it certainly isn't Markan. What it is, is a doctrine known as vicarious atonement or substitutionary atonement—that Jesus was sacrificed in our place because our sin was so bad that we couldn't bear the cost of it ourselves, couldn't ourselves bear the cost of coming clean before God, so Jesus did it for us, as God required.

And forget that what this suggests about God, that he was more an abusive father than a loving father, is contrary to what's more insistently said of God, that God is love. Forget that God's wrath would here need to be so great at the fact of pervasive sin, though amidst a creation that *God is creating*, which suggests that sin is somehow also of God's creating, and that our participation in it can only hardly be helped, if it truly pervades. Forget that God's wrath is nonetheless thought to

be so overwhelming in our regard (though so much of this is not our fault!) that someone needed to die in order for God's love to win out.

Forget all that, because it's *doctrine* and it's "good news," so get happy.

Yikes.

And yet it sticks, this doctrine does. Coming to us from the 10th century, Anselm of Canterbury developed it, this doctrine of atonement, vicarious or substitutionary. And though it can be constructed with a very specific reading of a few short lines from scripture, it isn't deeply scriptural, and it isn't Markan. Quite the contrary, Mark had an idea of the cross that was hardly so convoluted as all that. It was rather simple. Jesus would undergo suffering because the world wouldn't accept what Jesus was about in the world, would reject it, even violently—and yet the threat of this unsurprising real-world response to his making present disruptive love wouldn't sway him from making present disruptive love. Therefore, he must die.

This is the "must" of it, this and only this. The word here is *dei*, "it is necessary," and too often it's taken to mean that Jesus' mission was mainly to suffer and die. But that's not what this gospel text means for us to understand. Instead, it's this: it is necessary for Jesus to undergo great suffering because powerful people will oppose both Jesus' healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption this mission brings to established law and order—and their opposition will become violent. It will, however, not make Jesus stop.

So, the real epiphany here isn't that it was Jesus' *mission* to die, "but that his faithfulness to God's healing mission will inevitably *result* in his death." According to one scriptural scholar whom I've read over these long years of preaching this text, "In Mark, Jesus 'must' die because his commitment to human healing will not falter."

It really is that simple.

Peter would prefer it otherwise—and perhaps so might we. Peter, who had just confessed Jesus as the Messiah, preferred it otherwise, had a very different messiah in mind than one who must be killed. Yes, Jesus was the Messiah—but that didn't mean what Peter likely thought it would mean. The Messiah had long been a hoped-for figure. Among Israelites and Judeans, the Messiah had long been anticipated as someone who would drive imperial forces out of the land, be they Assyrian or Babylonian or Persian or Roman. The Messiah would, it was thought, restore the Davidic kingdoms to their prior sovereignty and flourishing, would, like David, be a mighty warrior-king.

Which is likely what Peter was confessing when he recognized something singular in Jesus—that he was this sort of messiah. So, the next thing Jesus would say, this talk of suffering, this talk of being killed: this was anathema. It just didn't make any sense.

Consider, though: for such things not to happen to Jesus, he would have to yield. For this ugly fate not to befall Jesus, it would mean that Jesus had given way—because the power structures weren't about to. Those can't risk yielding to someone challenging their authority. They never can. When the forces draw the line, if they don't hold the line, then people will know. People will know—they're not serious, they're not indomitable. So, they have to save face, which means at that point their only choice is advance, even violent advance.

What Peter was in effect advocating, then, when he told Jesus to shut up with this talk of suffering, was for Jesus to abandon his path, to abandon the way of the Lord; and this, in effect, was as tempting a thing as Jesus might have faced in the wilderness with the devil.

Devil comes to us from the Greek *diabolos* meaning to divide or to separate. It's akin to the Hebrew *ha' Satan* meaning adversary. Both would divide Jesus from the divine which was utterly present within him. Both would present as opposing rather than withstanding. And this means Jesus wasn't calling Peter a nasty name in saying to him, "Get behind me, Satan." He was naming the spirit in which Peter was now acting, in opposition and adversarial, in aiming to separate Jesus from his true path. This, when what Peter was actually to do was to join with Jesus in walking this true path, to join him in faithfully walking the Way and continuing to walk in the Way with Jesus no matter what.

It's a tall order.

No wonder Peter wanted Jesus to shut up.

No wonder so might we.

But there is no shutting up the word of God. There is shutting up the love of God. Fear couldn't keep it contained. Death couldn't keep it contained. Not even the tomb, with the big rock, would shut it up. Perhaps not even medieval doctrines can keep it contained. The end of love is just too good. The aim of justice and truth and abundant life are just too good. The promise of these overwhelm even the faintest of heart. The persistence of these wear down even the most fortified thinking.

These are tough times we're living through, each day the national mood being even more tense and frustrated, each day bringing even more unreason and rage. The unresolved humiliation and grief foisted upon our whole society in the attack on the twin towers twenty years ago has

entrenched itself and grown evermore powerful, evermore reactive. The thirst for a good fight seems almost everywhere we turn, while public health and shared wellbeing through small acts of personal sacrifice, or more often personal inconvenience, are taken as assaults on freedom. The outraged individual holds sway over the shared imperative of mutual service and love, things by which we are *actually* saved.

Truly, the project of love is as hard as it's ever been, in my lifetime at least.

It's at just such a time when we might find ourselves with Peter in his wanting a Messiah who isn't about to suffer, who isn't about to suffer for the sake of sanctification and salvation, but who will stick it to the bad guys and come out on top.

But such a messiah would be more of the devil than of God, more of division than of sanctification. Jesus wouldn't do it. So must not we.

I've preached this sermon before—good news though hard news. But if you're like me, you never really stop needing to hear it. You never really have your thinking so transformed that your mind and understanding encompass it all, so good that you can trust it, so good that you can trust it, that God is love, and love is the way and love is the end, though the world will not have it, God who is love will win. So, I'm sure I'll preach it again. In fact, there's almost nothing I'd rather do.

Thanks be to God.