

## Maybe Today, Satan

Mark 8:31-38

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.'

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I was on a Zoom call about a year ago now with some youth ministry colleagues trying to figure out how the pandemic was going to affect our ministries over the next few weeks . . . During that meeting, I noticed the coffee mug that one of my youth ministry buddies was drinking from. It was this oversized white ceramic mug that said, in big black letters, "Not Today, Satan!" Everybody got a kick out of it.

Well, as you know, those weeks turned to months which turned to seasons, and the time came for this cohort to gather once again and brainstorm what fall semester youth ministry might look like. As I dragged myself back on Zoom, I looked at my friends and noticed how very tired everyone looked. Worn out. A bit more frayed than last time. I also saw that my friend's coffee mug had changed. Printed in those same big black letters, the mug he held in his hands now read, "Maybe today, Satan." We all still had a laugh about it, but those two coffee mugs got in my head.

Not today, Satan! Yeah, there was a time I had the energy to boldly stand against the deadly sins of the evil one. But lately and after all we've been through, I dunno. I mean, sloth and gluttony feel like pretty acceptable coping mechanisms these days. Envious of those who have already gotten their vaccine? Yep. Wrath toward the no-maskers? Check. Pride when I drop my kids off at school wearing jeans instead of sweatpants? You betcha.

I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm not going around sacrificing to idols of Dr. Fauci, and the only thing I've been killing lately is boxes of Girl Scout cookies – but I don't know. Maybe today, Satan?

Now before you run me out of town or post on Facebook how one of your pastors was all like "Yay Satan" in church today, let's take a moment and actually about Satan. And in particular, why Jesus calls one of his closest disciples by that name.

Okay, let's start by clearing the pipes of all the literary, artistic, and Hollywood baggage we can. The image of Satan as a red, mustachioed critter with horns and a pitchfork – get rid of it. Not in the Bible. Satan as a terrifying three headed monster munching on traitors in the ninth circle of hell? That's Dante – also not in the Bible. Satan as the serpent in the garden of Eden? Not according to the story in Genesis. If you read, Genesis merely says that the serpent was cunning. It isn't until the book of Revelation that the symbolic connection between Satan and the ancient serpent is established.

What about Satan as a fallen angel named Lucifer – so we're getting closer – but there's still so much symbolic imagery there that it doesn't do us much good. Then there's Satan as the one who talks

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God into letting him test the faithfulness of Job by ruining Job's life – yeah, now we're on to something. This is the Satan that Jesus has in mind when he rebukes Peter.

The Hebrew word *Sa taan* means accuser or adversary, someone who contents with, opposes, or resists another. So when Jesus rebukes Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan", let's try to hear what Jesus is saying. Get behind me, accuser. Get behind me, adversary.

It's kind of a startling moment in the Gospel of Mark, isn't it? Just four short verses earlier, Peter lands a slam dunk answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" to which Peter replies, "you are the Messiah". A+, gold star for Peter. Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah is a big one, especially for the Jews living in Roman occupied Judea. Peter is standing in the deep Jewish tradition of longing for the Messianic age when the promised Messiah would be sent by God to free the Hebrew people from oppression. Peter and his fellow Jews would have seen such a Messiah, or anointed one, as a conqueror, charging into Jerusalem with an army behind him to overthrow Rome and return the Promised Land to the Jews.

Since the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army, the Jews had suffered centuries of exile and occupation from the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. And while prophets like Isaiah foretold of the coming of a messiah, a savior, a liberator, to the Hebrews, such a promise had been a long time coming by the time Jesus arrives on the scene. So when Peter claims Jesus as the long foretold Messiah, it is a really big deal for the disciples. News of this Messianic arrival could quickly overshadow anything else Jesus said or did. The Jews would rally behind their conquering hero. Rome would close ranks and hunt down Jesus and his followers. It was too soon for word to get out. Not yet. So, Jesus instructs his disciples to keep silent.

But Jesus doesn't keep silent with his disciples. Gathered with the twelve, Jesus begins to explain to them what being the Messiah means, "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." Not the messiah the disciples had bargained for. "Woah, woah, woah," we imagine Peter saying as he pulls Jesus aside. "What are you talking about? What is all this stuff about suffering? The Messiah isn't supposed to suffer and be rejected and killed!"

The Bible doesn't actually tell us what Peter's rebuke to Jesus was, but something tells me that we've got a classic conflict between expectations and reality. They expected a war hero, and instead, they got a casualty. And, it's easy to roll our eyes at the thick-headedness of the disciples, but let's remember that Peter was a real person. A real person who had known suffering all his life, had known occupation all his life, and known oppression all his life, for all his family's life, and for centuries of his people's history. Peter isn't being a know-it-all here. I think Peter is desperate, desperate for a change, desperate for help, for salvation, for himself and his people. Something has got to give.

"Jesus," we imagine Peter saying, "what are you talking about? The Messiah isn't supposed to suffer. Haven't we suffered enough?" Haven't we suffered enough? Haven't we suffered enough through sickness and storm? Haven't we suffered enough through violence and hatred? Huh, Jesus? Haven't we, as a human species, suffered enough? And you're telling us that there's more suffering to come, more death to come?

I have to admit, I'm kind of with Peter here. I'm kind of feeling a little Satan-y about this. I feel the need to push back on Jesus, on the notion in this passage where Jesus appears to dismiss or condone suffering. I want to oppose Jesus when he says we should deny ourselves, our personhood, and allow ourselves and others to be dehumanized. I want to accuse Jesus for being complicit in centuries of Christians using texts like this to justify the silent suffering of the abused, of women, of people of color.

"Well, that's just your cross to bear." Jesus even says to Peter, "For you are setting your mind not on

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divine things but on human things.” Yeah, but these human things matter Jesus! If following Jesus means we look at the suffering and death of last week’s winter storm as God’s will, then I say no. If following Jesus means that the powers of discrimination, violence, and greed go unchecked, then I say no. If following Jesus means being a Christian nationalist or a complicit pawn of patriarchal white supremacy, if that’s what following Jesus means, then I say no.

In this moment, in verse 32, I’m with Peter. Our world has suffered enough. This cannot be the kind of messiah we were promised. This cannot be the will of God, and I say no.

Maybe it’s the word “Satan.” Maybe it’s how our modern ears register the word “Satan” and all its baggage that influences how we hear this passage. I always heard the phrase, “Get behind me, Satan” as being shouted in anger, a command – full of force, like an exorcist banishing the prince of darkness.

But what if we changed our tone of voice? What if we remembered that *Sa taan* refers to a being who is willing to contend with God? What if instead of hearing Jesus shout this line at Peter, we instead hear a more familiar voice of invitation? What if instead of banishing Peter from his presence, Jesus is actually inviting Peter, his adversary in that moment, to follow him more closely.

Instead of stressing “Get BEHIND me, SATAN”, we instead put the emphasis back on Jesus Christ. “Get behind ME, adversary.” Get behind ME – not who you think I’m supposed to be – get behind ME. That sounds more like the Jesus we know. That sounds more like the Jesus that is constantly inviting, constantly empowering, constantly and relentlessly calling us to discipleship. Jesus has to know that the disciples are struggling to make sense of all this. Why would Jesus banish those who are genuinely seeking wisdom and understanding?

And maybe just that little change opens up more of the passage. What about Jesus’ next line? “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” It sounds like Jesus is dismissing those human things – things like hunger and oppression and suffering. But again, that’s not the Jesus we know. Jesus does care about those things. Jesus reorders the cosmos toward a long arc of justice because he cares about those things. Jesus became human to show us how much God cares about those human things.

What if we nuance these words of Jesus with everything else we know about him? ‘For you are setting your mind not on the divine things I’m talking about, but on the human things I still care about.’ And just like that, we hear it. Jesus isn’t dismissing Peter. Jesus isn’t condoning suffering or anything like that.

What Jesus is doing is showing Peter the way to God. Jesus is showing us what it means to be a follower, a disciple of this Messiah. And here’s what Jesus says, “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.”

(sigh). Again, with the suffering! Denial of self, death by torture and crucifixion, and being lead around all our lives – that sounds like suffering! Okay, okay. Not today, Satan. Let’s remember. Jesus calls us to set our minds on the divine things he has come to show us. And if Jesus isn’t in the business of creating more human suffering, what are the divine things Jesus is telling us here? Let’s take this part by part.

Perhaps denying ourselves reminds us that we are never the only ones who are suffering – that the world doesn’t in fact revolve around us – that things like empathy and compassion are central to our discipleship. So denying ourselves isn’t a call to doormat dehumanization – it’s a call to humility, maybe even foreshadowing the new commandment that we love one another and Christ loved us.

And perhaps taking up our cross reminds us that being a Christian doesn’t mean our human suffering will magically go away just because Jesus took the wheel. Remember, O Mortal, that you are dust

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and to dust you shall return. It is true that we all suffer and we all will die. But instead of hopelessly waiting around for the cross that inevitably comes for us all, Christ calls us to take it up – to be real about it, to mark it on our foreheads. Yes, taking up the cross reminds us that we will die, but it also reminds us that we're not dead yet.

Acknowledging the inevitability of suffering and death is what gives life a sense of purpose and immediacy. Suffering and death teach us the immense value of love, of gratitude, of joy and friendship, of truth, goodness, and beauty. The cross reminds us that our dying does not define our living – for when our living and our dying are both shaped by the cross, so too is our new life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And finally, perhaps the call to follow Christ brings the purpose of our living and the recognition of our suffering together in the true and divine meaning of discipleship.

Simply put, we follow Jesus so that we may become like Jesus - a human life filled with divine love, a human heart fueled by divine compassion, a human body embraced by divine beauty, a human life saved by divine grace. We seek to become like Jesus not for the sake of our own lives, but for the sake of Christ and his Gospel that live on through us. As disciples of Christ, we are made one as his body, the church, broken in our suffering and re-membered in our life as divine good news, a living Gospel for the world.

And once we as his followers begin our formation into the likeness of Jesus Christ and are made to be his living and holy good news through the life of the church, once we set our minds on this divine thing proclaimed by our Messiah – then what?

Well. As it turns out, the more divine things you set your mind on, the more human things you end up doing, or rather, the more human suffering you work to alleviate, because that's what Jesus cares about. You call on people to check on them during bad weather. You share water and food and blankets and firewood. You care for your kids. You help fix broken things. You give money. You drop your representative a note calling for change. You ask for help when you are suffering. You pray for those who have died. You heal when you're sick. You rest when you're tired. And you celebrate when the storms pass.

What a divine way to spend a human life. And if you're from Texas, what a divine way to spend a week. A really cold week. I mean, come on Jesus! Don't make me get that mug.

Amen.

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