

**Cross and Crown**  
**March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015**

**Mark 8:31-38**  
**Lent 2 B**

**Pastor Rob Zeratsky**

Jesus knew what was coming. Of course he did, he is God. He knew the time was close and he knew what was ahead would be difficult. But even more than the suffering he would go through, he was more concerned about the effect this would have on his disciples. And so repeatedly through their training, Jesus does everything he can to warn the disciples about what was coming for himself and more importantly, that this was okay. What was about to happen was necessary, it was vital to us all.

Despite his best efforts though, the disciples did not really understand. Probably because they were still so wrapped up in their preconceived notions of what the Messiah was supposed to do. Their reading of the prophets left them with the idea that the Messiah would be a literal new David, a great king over their nation. Someone who would lead them back to the glory and power the people once had. They expected a revival of the great nation they had read about in the histories. The idea that this man they were following had it in mind to be captured and executed did not fit with that at all.

And this is where we see Peter today as Jesus once again tries to prepare his disciples for the future. <read text: Mark 8:31-33>.

We know from our other gospel accounts the content of what Peter said to Jesus. "This will never happen to you!" Not really sure what Peter was thinking here, trying to tell God how things were going to go. Peter was likely focused on what he expected of Jesus and when God's plan didn't fit his expectation, one of those had to change. For some reason he decided it was God's plan that should change. Of course, as irrational as that kind of statement was, it was also very human and not at all surprising.

It is in our nature to be short-sighted. It is in our nature to live essentially for the moment. We get caught up in our immediate needs or wants and fail to look further ahead to see how our decisions now might affect things down the road. As we grow and mature we train ourselves to do better at this...most of the time. But even then, the scope of our vision has a habit of bottlenecking in our limited lives and not looking clearly at the eternity beyond. This, ultimately, was Peter's problem. He had a human perspective on what was going to happen, not God's perspective. He thought what he wanted was a good thing, for God's kingdom to be restored on earth. But God's plan was far more grand in scope than just that.

After all, what would have happened if Jesus had listened to Peter? An earthly kingdom under God, sure. Probably a great place to live. But after that life, then what? Certainly those who lived there would be trained to have faith and devotion in the true God but all the faith in the world means nothing if there's nothing for that faith to receive. Without a sacrifice for their sins, they would have died and had to be punished for their sins. And so seventy or eighty years of decent happiness, followed by an eternity of torment.

But God's plan worked differently. God's plan was to put the torment on himself and save the real happiness for eternity. Yes, this meant that the Messiah would have to do some undignified things. More than that, he would need to undergo severe suffering and humiliation and death itself. This was not the grand and glorious future Peter imagined, this was better. Because in God's plan the death would be once for all and the kingdom it earned and prepared for his people would last forever and they would last forever in it. Not an earthly kingdom for a short time with limited joy, but an eternal kingdom with perfect joy forever. In God's plan, Jesus would bear the cross but the reward would be an eternal crown of glory.

None of this should really be new information for you. But the reason I am emphasizing it now is because of what comes next. You see, Jesus tells us here that we have essentially the same fork in the road before us that he faced. <read text: Mark 8:34-38>.

It's the same choice Jesus had to make when Peter confronted him with a different plan. Will it be your plan or God's plan that you follow? Will it be the plan of men or the plan of God? Now, naturally, sitting here, thinking spiritual thoughts you might think to yourself, "That's not contest, of course I'm going to follow God's plan. I know his is better." Intellectually, right now, you know that is the right choice. But is that the choice you make? Put yourself in Jesus' sandals for a moment and look at the options. You are God. You can do what you like. On the one hand you march toward an entire day of prolonged earthly pain and torture and death, not to mention the torment of hell itself piled on top of that. On the other hand, you could set that aside and simply do what you like. Are you willing to pick up the cross, knowing what it will cost you? On that comparison alone, the cross seems a foolish choice.

Of course, you also know what it will accomplish. It will mean a time of suffering the likes of which none of us have reference for. But it will accomplish the eternal salvation of so many. Without that suffering absolutely everyone else

will have to suffer that same torment forever. But if you take the cross, some will be spared. Some will be saved. Yes, some will still stubbornly refuse the gift, but at least everyone will have the chance. Without the cross, there will be no crown of victory for anyone. And so when you look beyond the cross, when you consider the eternal perspective, there still is really only one choice, but it's very obviously the cross.

It is much the same for ourselves. Jesus tells us we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. But the choice for us presents the same difficulties. Jesus once said about the apostle Paul, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." And that is true of all who bear the name of Christ. To be a Christian means to wear Christ's name. It means to be in the world as his representative, to be here in his name. If the world rejected Christ and put him to death, how should we expect any better treatment? This is the cross that Jesus tells us we must bear. It is everything we suffer for his name. There are other things we do suffer, things that God sends into our lives as discipline for us, but they are not all the cross that Jesus urges us to carry here. The cross we are asked to carry is that which we suffer for his name because we will not deny his name. The cross is something we could choose to put down or not even pick up in order to try to save our lives.

That's the key difference between the suffering of the cross and any other trials we may endure in this life. The cross we could choose to put down. We could choose never even to pick it up. And like Jesus contemplating the difference between his Father's plan and Peter's, one looks far more attractive than the other. And Satan doesn't leave us alone to make that choice, he appeals to us exactly the same way he appealed to Jesus through Peter.

The moment comes to us each in a thousand different ways, over and over again during our days. A co-worker makes a lewd comment and we must respond. A friend pressures us into some seemingly harmless vice. We are asked to set aside something we want in order to do what God asks. To give up an extra hour of our time, or to disrupt our schedule or our budget. Whichever way it happens, the core of it is always the same. Do we sacrifice something for the sake of God or do we sacrifice God for the sake of ease or peace or pleasure? And Satan whispers to try to turn our heads. He tries to convince us that we're better than the suffering God asks of us. We shouldn't have to endure that, we don't deserve that kind of shabby treatment. Or why should we give up what we want, especially just this once? It won't make a difference in the long run, no one will notice.

And in the short-term it's very appealing. Why give up what we have or want? Why bring discomfort or suffering on ourselves when we don't have to? But that's the short-term. That's where Satan wants us to keep our eyes. It's not the full picture. We already talked about what would have happened if Jesus had kept his eyes on the short-term. It would have been disastrous. So also for us. To put aside God, to sacrifice him for our own convenience has long-term consequences. Jesus warns here what will happen to those who are ashamed of him and his words in this world. He will not acknowledge you before the Father! To those who would seek to preserve and keep this earthly life, he tells us that is how your life will be lost! Every denial of our God, every time we set down the cross for our comfort damages our faith, weakens it. And that means risking its loss, risking the eternal loss of life.

But whoever is willing to give up this life for him will have his life saved. If we put our trust in him, and abandon our hold on this life and everything in it, we will be saved forever. Yes, the cost is a cross to bear now. It means taking on unpleasantness and it means giving up things we might want in the short-term. But the reward is perfect and eternal. It is a crown of victory that cannot begin to compare to what we give up here. We must keep the eternal perspective. We must look down the road to what is coming and consider what we are giving up every time we set aside our God for some small profit now. The trade-off is never worth it.

But we cannot keep that perspective or mindset ourselves. On our own we can only see the short-term, we can only listen to the lies of the devil. We must rely on God's strength to help us lift the cross when the choice comes to us. And to do that we must stay connected to his strength, to the power of the Holy Spirit who works in us through Word and Sacrament. The more we let the Spirit work on us the more we will be able to set aside our narrow-minded perspective and the stronger we will be to lift the cross of Christ when it is asked of us.

We each have been told what is coming. Jesus has made it plain to us. We know what we need to face it and God is willing to give it to each of us. By trust and faith in him, we are purified and forgiven, even of those times we set the cross down. We need our God to survive what is coming. Yes there is a cross to carry in his name for now. But God will help you bear that cross, and the burden of it is only temporary. At the end of the road, there is a crown of victory waiting, a crown that will never fade or tarnish. Carry the cross for Christ, look to the crown at the end. Amen.