

Lent 2B: Mark 8:31-38  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **Beautiful in the Broken Places**

Years ago, the popular spiritual writer Thomas More was invited to speak at a large university. My colleague was the chaplain there at the time. He reported that More is a very nice man, who believes that we are all rather nice people who would be ever so much happier if we just learned to think about ourselves as he thinks about us. After More's rather vague, self-help homily, the chaplain encountered a woman who said to him, "I'm so glad next week is Ash Wednesday." Glad for Ash Wednesday? Why on earth are you glad for that?, the chaplain wondered. She explained, "You don't know me that well, but I was the victim of abuse by a relative when I was a young teenager. I spent years in therapy trying to get over it. Pop spirituality and feel-good religion were no help to me. That's why I'm glad we're coming to that time of the year when the church makes us put all the injustice, sin, blood, and guilt on the altar and forces us to look at it and let God deal with it."

Indeed! That is what Lent does. It allows us—even forces us—to face up to issues we would rather not have to face, thank you very much, but which we *need* to face. This morning, for instance, we are invited to take up one of the most recurring, important, and difficult topics in the Christian faith, one which is also the least spoken about: that is, disappointment with God.

Now, this can be a sensitive subject. Some Christians have been taught that it is simply unfaithful to talk about being disappointed with God, as if there is no surer mark of a lack of faith. Others perhaps don't think it's unfaithful exactly, but it still feels to them a little unseemly. Faith, we've picked up somewhere along the way, is the opposite of doubt, which is what makes talking about our disappointment with God so difficult...and so important.

For, this notion of doubt being the opposite of faith is not borne out in Scripture. I could point to any number of Psalms where the songwriters of Israel name their complaints, grievances, disappointments, and doubts. We looked at some of these Psalms of Lament this past August. As we discussed then, the naming of our disappointments and doubts is integral to the life of faith and, indeed, a necessary part of the process of growing closer to God. I could point too to Jesus

on the cross, who -- borrowing the words of one of those powerful psalms -- cries aloud his own great disappointment and despair: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But on this day I think there could be no better passage with which to explore this facet of our faith-lives than the confession and rebuke of Peter. In our lesson this morning, we only get the second half of that, the rebuke, but both halves are important if we are to understand the significance of this passage. In the verses just before our reading, Jesus asked the disciples, Who do you say I am? Simon Peter jumped to his feet and declared "you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." A miraculous statement, to be sure. But then, not two seconds later, Peter's being chewed out by Jesus, who compares Peter to Satan himself. Now, if there is one emotion we can imagine Peter feeling after his rebuke of Jesus--it's disappointment. Anger, perhaps as well; embarrassment, likely; but at the head of all of these is disappointment. Disappointment precisely because Peter has just named Jesus as God's Messiah, the living and breathing hope of Israel.

This is why Peter reacts so strongly to Jesus' prediction of his death. He simply cannot imagine that the Messiah will suffer, let alone be killed. So great is his shock, perhaps, that he can't even hear the part about rising on the third day. All he hears is the word -- the awful, unthinkable word -- that Jesus will be killed, and with him the hope of Israel. No wonder Peter rebukes him. This is not just nonsense, it's blasphemy. The savior of the world, suffer? God's Messiah, die? Are you mad?

I want to suggest that there's nothing "wrong" with feeling that way. Peter may be mistaken about how events will play out, and he surely has more to learn about the God he worships and the Messiah he follows, but he is not wrong in assuming that God's Son should suffer no harm. Everything he has been taught and everything he knows about God screams that this just can't be true.

To Peter, and to everyone but Jesus, it seems, God's being all-powerful means that he can be expected to protect his chosen ones. As Robert Capon noted, such a God certainly wouldn't let his Messiah, his representative on earth, do something stupid like rise from the dead; God would make sure his Messiah never died.

That is, in fact, what Muslims believe about Jesus. According to Islamic teaching, Jesus is a prophet of Allah—God—and as such could not have been crucified. Such a dishonor is unthinkable for a prophet of Allah. *Allahu akbar*. God, Allah, is great. God is great and mighty and would not let one of his prophets be crucified and killed. That would reflect poorly on Allah. What happened, they say, is that Jesus faked his death or in some other accounts Simon of Cyrene was crucified, not Jesus. So strong is the resistance to the idea of God's chosen one being allowed to be killed.

And, to be perfectly honest, do we really think we would have been any different? I mean, who would imagine that the God of heaven and earth would redeem Israel and the world *by dying a criminal's death*? Who could predict that God's strength would be revealed most fully in weakness, or that God's judgment would be rendered so completely in undeserved and unexpected mercy? It is simply unthinkable.

And for this reason, we struggle to make sense of when God fails to save us the way we expect him to. We are not wrong to wonder, Where is God?, when you hear that your neighbor, a single parent, is diagnosed with cancer, or when your child calls you from jail or becomes addicted to drugs, when your marriage falls apart despite your doing everything “right,” when your job -- and with it so much of our identity -- is taken from you, or when any number of other disappointments and disasters fall upon us. Because everything in us tells us that these things are not what God wants, or desires, or wills. No, we are not wrong to be disappointed with God.

Hillary Scott, best known as the lead singer of the band, Lady Antebellum, expressed this feeling in a song she sang:

I'm so confused/I know I heard you loud and clear  
So I followed through/Somehow I ended up here  
I don't wanna think/I may never understand/  
That my broken heart is a part of your plan

Scott was no doubt speaking of herself, but it could just as well have been Peter saying it, or any one of us. For we can identify with Scott's words. We've done what we felt God wanted, followed the rules, done what was expected of us, but the life, the marriage, the job, the *future* we thought we would have, hasn't work out. Our hope gets taken from us. And we can't help but feel disappointed, maybe even a little *betrayed* by God. Sure, maybe God didn't outright promise us the life that we thought we'd have, but that doesn't mean we were wrong in expecting it.

No, it's not wrong to be disappointed with God when things don't work out that way. But we may have more to learn. Because the God revealed in Jesus shows up most powerfully in the broken places of our lives and world. Like Peter, we are disappointed because we do not get the God we want, the God we've been taught to worship, the God we have a reason to expect.

But, also like Peter, in Jesus' cross and resurrection we discover not the God we may want, but the God we desperately need. You see, like Peter, we and just about everyone we'll ever know want a strong God, a God who protects us, who heals our illnesses, who provides prosperity, who guarantees our security, who urges our military and sports teams onto victory, and generally keeps us happy, healthy, and wise. But that's not what Jesus offers. Instead, Jesus points to a God who takes off his glory to join us in our shame; a God who leaves heaven to enter our hell-on-earth; a God who abandons strength -- at least strength as we imagine it -- so that God can join us, embrace us, hold onto us, and love and redeem us at our places of weakness. The God we meet in Jesus is a God who meets us in vulnerability, suffering, and loss. That is, in those moments when we really need God, when all we had worked for, hoped for, and striven for fall apart and we realize that we are, quite simply, mortal, incapable of saving ourselves and desperately in need of a God who meets us where we are. This God understands our disappointments, and meets us in them to teach us that it is at the places of our brokenness, our broken hearts, that we experience God's love most fully.

A few years ago, I was introduced to a rather unique Japanese art known as *kintsugi* or *kintsukuroi*. Kintsugi is the art of repairing broken pottery with precious metals. When one of

their beautiful delicate bowls or teapots is broken, they don't throw the pot away as we would. Instead they take the broken pieces and glue them together with a special lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. Beautiful seams of gold would then glint in the cracks of the ceramic ware. And because of the randomness with which ceramics shatters, every repaired piece is unique, with the irregular patterns enhanced with the use of precious metals. Making the broken china a truly exquisite piece of art. The practice of kintsugi is about far more than just pottery, of course. It is all about embracing broken bits, not throwing them away, but showcasing the beauty of their brokenness. This is a fit metaphor for what God can do with our brokenness, if we let him.

You see, when our expectations are shattered and the life we knew lies in a thousand pieces on the floor, it's natural to feel disappointment, even betrayed by God. It's not wrong to feel that way. But if the story of Jesus tells us anything, it is that God can make something beautiful out of the most horrible, destructive thing we can imagine. And he does this not by miraculously restoring us back to the way things were, as if we were never hurt, but instead by embracing the broken bits and putting them back together in such a way as to showcase their beauty. It says a lot, I think, that after Jesus was resurrected, his body was not miraculously healed but instead it still bore the marks, the scars of crucifixion, and he held them out for all to see.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant by saying that those who want to save their life – the life they've worked for and dreamed of -- those who want to save that life will lose it, and those who are able to let go of those expectations and the lives they've built around them, they will find life, life abundant, life that is beautiful in its brokenness.

So this week, I invite you to summon your courage and to name your disappointment with God. You can do this aloud, in writing, or in silent prayer. I assure you, there's no need to feel ashamed or embarrassed by them, or to hold back because we fear God will be angry with us if we voice our disappointment—God can handle it. More than that, God has promised to meet us in those disappointments and stay with us until we come out onto the other side of disappointment with a deeper faith, and we find the sharp, jagged edges are covered by the preciousness of God's grace. And in the meantime, I want you to know that you have others here to support you and pray for you. For the church isn't just a place you go to when you have it all together but the place you run to when life is falling apart too. For we are a people who accept that we are broken, because we know that it's through our brokenness that God's shines his beauty and grace. Thanks be to God!