

Losing Our Way

The second sermon in the series:

The God We See

Mark 8.27-35

September 13, 2009

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -- I took the one
less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

- Robert Frost

The Reading

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?' ²⁸And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.' (The paraphrase in the Message captures this sense well and reads: "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.") ³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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

It's somewhat ironic that the one thing we need most in life is very hard to come by; a glimpse of God. I don't mean a reflection of God in a mirror, I don't mean a vision of God, I mean a real glimpse of God. But how do we gain such a glimpse? How and where can we see God? We can't place ourselves before the creation stories to the day before the first day, whatever that means. There's a reason these stories begin *in the beginning*. In truth they should probably read *before the beginning*. We weren't there. We can only witness to the effects of creation, the traces of God's handiwork, but not God as God; not God the divine, eternal One present when there was nothing. I know we can't penetrate the veil of time and

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space; but this doesn't stop me from trying. I often try to glimpse God in my mind's eye, and as we begin our reflection I invite you to do so as well; close your eyes and see if you can make your way back to the time before time, when there was only God. What do you see? I can't see anything, but I hear what sounds to be the subdued roar of creative vitality. I feel that power beginning to surge, waiting, longing, yearning to overflow into creation. We need a glimpse, a true glimpse of this God today and after we pray together, we will go about looking for that glimpse. May we pray?

Gracious One, grant us a true glimpse of your reality, your truth, your way, so that in losing our way - in losing ourselves in you - we may find the way less traveled that leads to light and life and joy. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

It could be argued that the thing we need most in life is a glimpse of God. Religions, in fact, are full of stories of individuals seeking such a glimpse. In our faith, for example, consider the story of Moses standing before the bush that was burned without being consumed; or Isaiah having a vision of God high and lifted up in the temple. Our Muslim friends tell the whimsical story of Muhammad seeking God's presence to negotiate the number of times per day people should pray. On his ascent he passes Moses, who continually sends him back up to negotiate a lower number. I've worked with these hard headed people, he would say, and I know they won't pray many times a day. After one too many trips, Muhammad balks, and tells Moses if he thinks the number should be lower, he should go see God himself!

We need a glimpse of God, but a glimpse of God is hard to come by. But we're lucky because we have Jesus; not a reflection of God, not a vision of God, but a true glimpse of God. In Jesus we know who God is, what God thinks, how God yearns to treat you and me. The problem is that this gift, this true glimpse of God, is underused. As I mentioned last week, we most often go to the Old Testament, to the stories of creation or to the Psalms that celebrate the creative power and love of God in awesome ways, but we fail to remember that the life, the works, and the teachings of Jesus give us a real glimpse of God. If we want to understand who God is, we should look just there.

We saw last week that God has a bias; that's right, a bias for each and every child represented in the broad diversity of humankind. God looks on the creation and sees every individual as a divine child. The God's just selfish, He's a one trick pony, all he sees are God's

children – everywhere God’s children - and God loves every one of them. The Pharisees in today’s gospel reading don’t think that is true, they think the Syro-Phonician woman is impudent and disrespectful to beg for help from Jesus. How dare she come to Jesus! Then Jesus ironically mimics their consternation in saying to her, woman, why should I do anything for you? We feed the children first, the children of God - the Jews - and then if there’s anything left over, the dogs under the table - the Gentiles - are fed. But Jesus is being ironic. This is no dog, this woman, this is a child of God and when she stands up to claim that status, Jesus says, you’re right, go home, your daughter is well. We’re all children of God and God yearns to embrace each and every one of us in love.

Today’s passage is one we often read, because it’s the first confession of faith in Jesus as Messiah, however tentative and confused it may be. It comes in the eighth chapter of Mark at Caesarea Philippi. Peter speaks for the other disciples when he expresses some beginning faith in Jesus as Christ. It’s misguided, it’s underdeveloped to be sure; but there it is laid out for everyone to see. We read this passage often, but we don’t read it thinking about what it tells us about God. We think about Jesus, we think with pity and gratitude at his willingness to suffer, to give himself over to the authorities, to die. We think about his humility. We think about his willingness to walk the way of martyrdom, but we don’t realize what his attitude and actions tell us about God.

Peter doesn’t want to hear anything about Messiah suffering and dying. In so many words Peter says, Jesus, you’re wrong, you don’t understand anything about Messiah. Messiah, like God, is triumphant. Let me pause to ask, what is the image of God was that lay behind Peter’s assertion? I’m sure that he sensed in his spirit that thunder of creative vitality, that power that brought forth a Universe; but it sounds like his God is very much akin to the one the Old Testament often touts; the Lord of Hosts, which is to say the Commander and Chief of the armies of heaven prepared and fully capable of destroying the enemy. Peter seems to think that God would at some point tear open the sky, come down and in one fell swoop wipe away all of the enemies of light and of life. And there have been – and still are - plenty of people who share Peter’s attitude. But Jesus doesn’t. He says to Peter, you don’t know how God works. He could as easily have said, you don’t know what power is. The Son of Man must exercise

power by suffering many things, be given over, and die, and then after three days raised to fullness of life.

Again, let me ask; what's the image of God that inspires Jesus' attitude? God is still the Lord of Hosts. God is still the power behind, beneath, and beyond the universe; the only vitality that could bring forth a world from nothing; so why doesn't God just tear open the heavens and wipe out darkness and evil? Why would God choose to pit love against darkness? This is the possibility that scares Peter so. Why would God choose to pit compassion and long suffering against death and chaos? Jesus knows something that Peter does not know, that we don't know. Jesus reveals an aspect of God that we don't want to see. Jesus reveals in word and work and life that there is but one power in the universe; one creative vitality that can stand against chaos and darkness, sin and estrangement, addiction and death; and that one abiding power is love.

In short, as the glimpse of God in the world, Jesus lost his life in order to gain it, knowing that love is the only vitality capable of standing up to darkness. The frightening part of this glimpse of God is that Jesus invites us, too, to walk this road less traveled. It's no wonder so few willingly travel this road! It's full of risk; it asks everything of us; it diffuses our anger and indignation, and challenges our tendency to brand our enemies as the other, which makes it easier to ignore or condemn them. It challenges us to see in the face of every child of God a reflection of God, because that silly old God loves them all.

God challenges us to lose ourselves in order to live fully. What does this mean, to lose ourselves? It does not mean we give up our identity, our strength, our responsibility, our wisdom, our reason... not even our freedom. We keep all of these and are invited to use them fully; only in doing so recognize that we have them as a gift from God. When we understand that all we are and all we have are gifts from God, we lose our swagger of autonomy and sense of importance, we cease to be the center of the universe. The self that cares so much for itself and is willing to sacrifice others for its welfare is lost forever, and all we are and have are placed in the service of love.

Many have given their lives in the service of the gospel, and this passage is a comfort to those who face adversity; but Jesus here challenges us to a more profound loss; a loss of the

very idea of who we are, of the thought that we can stand alone, of the thought that we can take care of ourselves, as well as the thought that we don't have anybody else to take care of. We can lose this self and in love be raised to fullness of life.

Do you want a glimpse of God? Well, be careful, because Jesus gives us a glimpse of God that is as challenging as it is comforting. Jesus invites and challenges us to take the road less traveled that leads through death to life, abundant life.