

Mark 8:31-38

Trusting the Costly Way

Saturday February 28th, the world woke up to the news that the US and Israel had gone to war against Iran. Of those paying attention, and even if you didn't, would not or did not wonder, what does this mean for the world? With all of the instability that has been felt around the world with the current president at the helm many people are feeling the weight of the unknown. What will this cost us? What will be the cause and effect? Will this bring stability or more instability?

For most of us, we have no idea. We conjecture. We ponder. We have conversations over the dinner table. Yet, I would hazard that most of us listening today have not experienced war directly. We see the images flash across tv screens and devices, but this still feels like someone else's problem. Or at the very least one that we have no influence over. So, we continue about our day. For what else are we to do?

I am certainly the least qualified to speak for or against these actions of aggression. I know little about world power, domination, nuclear weapons, or politics. Yet there is something that today's scripture readings would have us consider. As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem and what will certainly be his death, what are we to make of his words and actions as we live out our own lives personally and as part of a global community?

So far there are more questions than answers in both our understanding of Jesus and what is going on in the world now. And maybe that is what life really is like...always more questions than answers. That does not mean that we throw up our arms in despair, anger, retaliation, or judgement. It does mean that we look to the example of who Jesus cared about, who Jesus protected, healed, taught, and what he spoke out against.

We know that Jesus spent time with those we refer to as "the least of these". Jesus healed the sick, spent time with those who were broken hearted and grieving. He did not deny healing to those who would have appeared to be beyond the boundaries of his concern, such as the daughter of a Syrophenician woman. (Mark 7:24-30). He fed hungry bodies with bread and fish while feeding hungry souls with words of acceptance, forgiveness, love, justice, and grace. And when you hear the word, justice, remember for Jesus, justice was about making sure the most vulnerable were considered, remembered, and lifted up.

The reading from the Gospel of Mark chapter eight is one that really can use a little more context. Early on in the chapter as Jesus and his disciples are traveling through villages, he asks the question, "Who do people say I am?" And after getting a few

responses, he says to his disciples, "What about you? ... Who do you say I am?" And Peter's answer is remembered, "You are the Christ."

It was so apparent to them at that moment. This man with the power to have them leave their homes and families to spend time with him, to follow him, the one who they watched feed a multitude of people with food left over, the one who taught with an perception of scriptures that was beyond their understanding, who looked at the scriptures with a different lens, this had to be the Messiah. The one who would fulfil their scriptures and finally take back their rights, lead them to victory over oppressors, who they would crown king in power and might, this was Jesus.

Then he tells them, "...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." (Mark 8:31-33).

We are so used to power being right or taking control through aggression that when we are faced with a different kind of power, the power of love, justice for those with no voice or power, the power of grace, we don't understand how that can work. It feels like looking at the world through rose-coloured glasses. It seems unimaginable that the world can be different or operate within different parameters than that of power and might taking control in ways that devalue human life or think it acceptable that life be taken.

And let's not be naïve, Jesus' own life was taken on a cross by those who wanted to control the narrative and quiet the masses through fear and coercion. And Jesus hits the nail on the head when he says about those who operate in the world that way, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (8:36) The New International version says it another way, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"

You can have everything, all the power, all the wealth, but if it sucks you of your humanity, your compassion, your understanding that there is or will be suffering because of your decisions, then you have lost your life. It is our common humanity, compassion, our seeking to understand those we do not understand, speaking for those who have no voice, those things and more which demonstrate that each person is of value, this is what brings life.

It is the more difficult way. It is the way of the cross. It means trusting what cannot be seen. It is not blind trust. It is trust built on the tradition and words of scripture, the story of humanity's experience of God. And God is faithful, loving, just, and compassionate. If God were not compassionate than Jesus would never have come to live among us, die to save us, and rise again that we might have life.

The story of Abram and Sarai is one of God's promise and compassion. It is a story of blessing of covenant, but the story is that Abraham and Sarah are now changed, their names are changed, and their future is changed. Those who were beyond hope in having a child blessed with a child and through them nations will be blessed. Their story undergirds the story of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. We share a common story. We are all part of the same human story. We are part of the many nations promised to share the faith of Abraham, the faith he had in one God who made a promise, a covenant with both Abraham and Sarah. Both the man and the woman are promised that they will give rise to nations and king of peoples shall come to them.

God asked of them faith before proof, trust before understanding. They did not know what all of this meant for them, God just said start walking. Start living in the knowledge that God goes with you. They were not promised smooth roads. They encountered many challenges. And Jesus spoke of the same. Jesus did not run around suffering, challenges, and grief. He did not and does not promise that if you believe you will not suffer, in fact he says the opposite. Faith will be costly. It will include suffering because the human condition, human life, includes it. But we are not to avoid it. Jesus did not avoid the cross. Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (8:38)

Maybe the reading is best understood through the words of The Message,

"Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"¹

And that is the answer we are given about faith, change, leadership, suffering and love. It is not the answer we want, just as it was not the answer Peter wanted, but it is the costly way of the cross and we are asked to trust that costly way will bring us life. It will bring us life that values the lives of others, see the image of God in each person, and asks us to give of ourselves. It is life shaped by both sacrifice and hope. It is life that understands that God's promises may not be comfortable but they are always faithful.

As you go from this place and time, I invite you to take up your cross, be disciples of Christ, knowing that Christ was willing to die for you, and now sits at the right hand of God...God who loves you, walks with you, and will transform your life with an abundance of hope, faith, grace, and love. And as God walks with you, walk with others in their despair, grief, suffering so that the light of Christ that you carry can be the flicker of hope that the world so desperately needs. Amen.

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