

The Crossroads Question
Mark 8:31-37; Psalm 22:23-31
Lent 2

Psalm 22:23-31

You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
 For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.
 From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever!
 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.
 For dominion belongs to the LORD, who rules over the nations, to whom, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before whom shall bow all who go down to the dust, and for whom I shall live. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

Mark 8:31-37

³¹Then Jesus began to teach the disciples 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.”

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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

The Sermon

You are walking a straight road in an open country, where the landscape is calm and welcoming, but doesn't give away any secrets.

It's a clear day, and the visibility is appealing. And it's a comfortable temperature: the sun is overhead in a clear sky, not beating down on you but seeming to smile benignly.

There's a nice field of grass on one side, bordered in the distance by some woods. On the other side, set a little ways back from the road, is an occasional house or barn or shed.

Up ahead in the distance appears to be more of the same, but it's not as entirely flat as it seems, and you can't quite see over the gentle ridge on the horizon.

And you come, as you knew you would, to a crossroads.

There's one of those old fashioned signposts, where arrowed planks point to what lies in each direction. You can more or less make out the writing, but the inscriptions are old, and the color has faded, so your decision of which way to go will have to be part hunch, part information.

To the left lies one destination; going to your right would take you the exact opposite direction, and straight ahead is more of the same—a road that, at least up until now, has been calm and welcoming enough, but doesn't seem to be getting you anywhere in particular. Continuing on would most likely bring you, eventually, to another crossroads, but who knows how far down the road, and who knows what possible destinations that crossroads may offer.

For right now, you have a decision to make.

This is a crossroads that people of faith come to every day.

According to Mark, Jesus began to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and that he would be rejected by all the religious and nationalist authorities, and be killed, and, three days later, would rise again. He was as straightforward about this with his disciples as Mark is in telling it to us. No cushioning adjectives or adverbs; just, "this is what has to happen." And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

I like Peter—at least, Peter as I imagine him: strong, impetuous, used to being able to handle problems with good-natured, confident affability and bonhomie if

possible, and toughness, grit and impatience if necessary. I imagine the short temper of a home protector, and the deep and vulnerable heart of a biker.

I think of Peter when I read these lines from Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote:

“My prayer is not the whimpering of a beggar nor a confession of love. Nor is it the petty reckoning of a small tradesman: Give me and I shall give you.

“My prayer is the report of a soldier to his general: This is what I did today, this is how I fought to save the entire battle in my own sector, these are the obstacles I encountered, this is how I plan to fight tomorrow.

“My God and I are horsemen galloping in the burning sun or under drizzling rain. Pale, starving, but unsubdued, we ride and converse.

“‘Leader!’ I cry. He turns his face towards me, and I shudder to confront his anguish.

“Our love for each other is rough and ready, we sit at the same table, we drink the same wine in this low tavern of life.”ⁱ

Jesus told the disciples, quite plainly, the strange and terrible things that were going to happen in the days that you and I now commemorate on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him: “Don’t give me that, Jesus. I won’t hear of it. With your power and my commitment and these, our friends to stand guard and protect you, we’re going to win because we say we’re going to win. You’re going to rule because we will not allow it to be otherwise. You will not succumb to suffering or loss or hardship because we will it, and we’re going to remain convinced that God wills it, too.”

But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan!” [Tempter.]

Peter and his tempting idea of using brute force and determination to fight their way to dominance will make way, because they have to make way, in order for Jesus to follow the pathway to the only victory that matters, the triumph of love over the world’s strategies of hate and threat and brutality.

When we dig in our heels and assert our power and use threats of force and weaponize our privileges, we stand in the way of Jesus' pathway to the cross. We can't get our minds off of the human things of fear, disbelief, and ultimate self-interest.

And Jesus says to his toughest earthly protector and biggest supporter: "You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things."

Every day, we come to a crossroads. It is embedded in all of our decisions of what to do and what not to do.

Will you help to make sure that all people are treated fairly and given the opportunity to live full lives?

Will you contribute to making sure that everybody has enough to eat?

Will you bring healing into the world so that people can see every single human being as a human being and not as if some people were more like just trees, walking?

Will you use your voice and if necessary your body to stand in the way of people, even religious people, throwing stones at those whom they find it acceptable to judge and attack?

Will you take time or make time to listen to God and pray, and then go right back to caring for people in tangible ways that respect not only their spirits but their physical humanity?

Will you love, forgive, and keep teaching and modeling goodness and holiness, in the face of hatred, cruelty and ignorance that's too arrogant to allow itself to learn and grow?

Will you give yourself rather than sacrifice others—and accept that many of your opinions, beliefs and convictions have kept you blind to how badly many of your decisions, unrealized by you at the time in your innocence, have led you to sacrifice others without even realizing it or certainly not even having meant to do so?

Every day we come to crossroads, and the signposts are often old, and the paint has faded, and the wood has rotted, and we can kind of make out what they say, but sometimes our hunches have to be corrected by information, and sometimes our data has to be nuanced by our humanity.

But we come to that crossroads involving all of those questions and more, every time we make a decision on

how to use our God-given time,
 which causes to support with our money and our abilities,
 where to shop and what to buy,
 how to treat the people around us,
 including those whom we'd rather not have to deal with,
 when to speak up and what to say,
 whom we will pray for and what we will pray about,
 how we will vote,
 how much to give to the church and to other ministries,
 how to deal with the poor,
 what to do with a world that is sick and mourning
 and bitterly polarized,
 and how best to be as much like Jesus as we can possibly bear.

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."

We come to this crossroads every day.

God made you and everyone else in God's image.

Jesus loves the person you are enough to go to the cross for you, and to keep forgiving and forgiving and forgiving.

The Holy Spirit can and does abide in you, enlightens your eyes, and animates in you a holy purpose.

Self-denial doesn't hate that person or ask you to hate the fact of your existence. Entirely the opposite.

Self-denial seeks to get rid of everything we want to cling to that disfigures the image of God in us.

Self-denial wants to overcome our aversion to and dread of the self-giving, humbling vulnerability of the cross.

Self-denial makes us available to the astounding possibilities that the Holy Spirit knows are waiting to be unleashed in all of us, but that we're holding on to too tightly because of our worldly hesitation.

The disciples aren't expected to be Jungian analysts; they were called away from their fishing nets or their tax office or wherever else to follow the teacher and lord who called them.

They're not all working on dissertations about ego and id and the "true self" and the persona.

Those kinds of studies are revelatory and spiritually clarifying, but the crossroads where Jesus asks you to make a decision is not forbiddingly complex or academic.

Nor is it a mystery which way he hopes you will go.

This is not a message for an exclusive audience.

The question at the crossroads is for everyone, and it is simply:

In every decision, with all of who you are:

Will you forever keep your mind set only on human things?

Or will you aspire to follow Jesus closely enough, and with enough integrity, to set your mind on divine things?

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ⁱ Nikos Kazantzakis, in Job & Shawchuck, eds., *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*. Upper Room Books, 1983; p. 116.