

Year B Sunday of the Passion In Death We Know Life Mark 14 v1 to 15 v47

Mark has two threads running through this narrative. One is the thread held in God's hand and the other is the thread held by humanity. God's thread seems subtle – perhaps you missed some of the ways in which Mark reveals God's hand in this story. But the human thread...the human thread appears bold and, to be blunt, very ugly throughout. Mark has a purpose in unfolding the Passion narrative in this way and his reasons are crucial to our understanding of what God is doing and to our lives as followers of God's way. So, let's follow those threads and see where they lead us.

First, let's take a look at God's hand in this story and in our own lives. Mark shows us God's hand mostly through the use of bits of Jewish scripture, especially the Psalms. Jesus' silence before his accusers reminds us of: "Truly, I am like one who does not hear, and in whose mouth is no retort" found in Psalm 38 (v.14). In the dividing of Jesus' clothes, we hear an echo of Psalm 22, and his cry of abandonment as he hangs on the cross, is a direct quote of that psalm's opening line. Jesus' own predictions of his death earlier in the Gospel are rooted in scripture and, when the crowd confronts him in the garden, he actually says: Let the scriptures be fulfilled. Taken together, these details give the impression that the events leading to his death fall within God's overarching purpose.

It is crucial, crucial to our understanding of God, crucial to our faith, to notice that this is hugely different from saying that everything is "scripted," as if God were moving chess pieces in a sordid plot to sacrifice the son (concept from Ira Brent Driggers, workingpreacher.org). There is a big difference in being the all-powerful, all-knowing God and being a God who controls people and events like puppets on strings. Just because you know something will happen, does not mean you are

making it happen. Mark weaves various moments of scriptural “fulfillment” into his narrative to show us divine faithfulness—divine faithfulness in continuity with God’s ancient covenant with Israel. We see the depths of this divine faithfulness most clearly in Jesus’ commitment to his mission, which is the restoration of humans and communities to every level of wholeness – total reconciliation among all creation and with God. Jesus refuses to dial down this ministry to spare his own life, or even to soften the backlash, facing hostility in full confidence that God brings life from death.

Jesus’ death at the hands of the powerful in Jerusalem, is the ultimate example of how God is able to take the very worst of humanity and use it toward the fulfillment of his purpose. That brings us to humanity...the thread of free-thinking, freely choosing humans. Mark’s narrative shows us the best and the worst of humanity. It begins as the Jewish leaders are trying to figure out a way to secretly get their hands on Jesus and kill him. They cannot openly arrest him since the adoring crowds who just welcomed him into Jerusalem as their Messiah would fight to stop them. Immediately after that, we are witness to some goodness.

Jesus is eating in the home of Simon the Leper. Once again, Jesus is hanging out with the cast out and ignored people he is not supposed to be hanging out with, showing to us the welcome and inclusiveness of God’s kingdom – a radical hospitality that goes beyond accepted social norms. In walks an unnamed woman with a jar of perfume. It is nard – oil from the spikenard plant – and it is very expensive. We are told it could have been sold for more than 300 denarii...nearly a whole year’s pay for a common worker. And this woman breaks open the jar and pours this scented oil over Jesus’ head. Some of the people, perhaps disciples, are

offended at this lavish display but Jesus commends her. This oil was meant for anointing – in particular, for anointing the dead. In pouring the oil, she has poured out her heart. In an astoundingly lavish display that reminds us of the abundantly lavish love of God, she anoints Jesus for his burial. This is the tipping point for Judas, though. Jesus was not living into the idea of the Messiah he'd held from his youth and he was going to do something about it. In return for money, Judas agrees to provide the opportunity to arrest Jesus that the chief priests were waiting for.

Jesus knows he has done this and, at the last supper with his disciples, he tells them that one of them will betray him. It is fascinating that, rather than flat out deny this, they question it: Surely, not I? they say. But when Jesus tells them they will desert him, Peter vehemently says he will never deny Jesus, even if it means his death at the hands of the Jewish authorities. The others wholeheartedly agree. I'm sure, in the moment, they meant what they said. They'd just made a covenant with Jesus – they'd become one with him through the sharing of bread and wine, his body and blood he told them.

The next thing you know, however, they're snoring in the garden while their friend is in turmoil. They desert him in his hour of anxiety and fear. Peter does indeed deny even *knowing* Jesus – just as vehement as he'd been earlier when he said he would stick by him – and they all flee when the crowd shows up. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, Jesus tells them. He has been praying to God, in turmoil knowing an excruciatingly painful and humiliating death awaits him. Take this cup from me, he prays. It is the human resistance of one called to do something difficult by God. Resistance of one called to be a crucial piece in God's

purpose that pushes us beyond what we want, or what we believe we are able to do. Death for the sake of all creature-kind, for the sake of the world – that’s a big ask.

Bishop Victoria Matthews, the first woman bishop in Canada, remembers her call to let her name stand for bishop. She was torn. It was a huge responsibility. In turmoil, she went off on one of the pilgrimages she loved to do – this one in Scotland. And on a windy, lonely mountain, with no one around she cried out to God, “You’re asking a lot, you know.” And, she says, for the first and only time in her life, she experienced a vision. It was Jesus, she said, looking down at her from the cross and all he said to her was, “Really?”

In complete love and trust and reliance in God, Jesus resolves to follow through on what he has been sent to accomplish. He impatiently wakes the disciples: It’s time, let’s get going, Judas is here. Judas has arrived with a crowd behind him. It is interesting to notice who was *not* there. The Jewish leaders have sent the crowd but they are not there themselves. This crowd has heard of Jesus but some aren’t sure what he looks like. I’ll greet him with a kiss, Judas says, then you’ll know who to grab.

The crowd shows up a lot in Mark’s Gospel. This people gathered angrily around Jesus in the garden are likely some of the same ones craning their necks and singing hosannas as Jesus rode into Jerusalem just a few days earlier. They eagerly spill all the dirt they can muster when the leaders ask for something to condemn this man called Jesus. And, when the chief priest tears his clothes, clearly condemning Jesus, the crowd turns brutal – beating Jesus, spitting on him, mocking him. We see this same mob mentality in the Roman guards.

Pilate knows Jesus is innocent. He knows the Jewish leaders want Jesus dead out of fear for their power. Pilate falls prey to the same fear. He could release Jesus – he is the governor and has that authority. He chooses not to upset the people and leaders, condemning an innocent man to death. The once adoring crowds are clamouring for his crucifixion – a horrible way to die – and the guards, as soon as Pilate condemns the man, they turn brutal...beating him, spitting on him, mocking him.

It is no better when Jesus is bloody and in agony hanging from the cross. The passers by mock him. The Jewish leaders mock him. Even the criminals mock him. If you're the Messiah, save yourself, they taunt. All of Jesus' astonishing teaching, his amazing healings, his awe-inspiring miracles – they've all been thrown out the window. Death is defeat, the people think. And defeat means he is not the Messiah. Save yourself, they demand. If you want us to believe we want a sign of our own choosing.

If all of this behaviour feels far removed from us now, it is not. Indignant judgement of someone doing something of which we do not approve? Mocking, bullying? Going along with others when we know we shouldn't? Not speaking up against an injustice? Resisting God's call to do something difficult? Asking God for a sign of our own choosing? We are all convicted in this story. And God tears his clothing in grief and bitterness at the depravity of the humans he created.

It is not all hopeless. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of human faithfulness to God and we are able to follow in his footsteps, like the woman who lavishly anoints him, like Peter's broken-hearted remorse when he realizes that he has denied his friend, like the women watching the cross from a distance waiting to

serve Jesus in his death just as they ministered to his needs in life, like the elder on the council – Joseph – who bravely reveals himself, to the rest of the Jewish leaders, as a follower of Jesus.

Mark deliberately frames his Gospel with Jesus' baptism: at the cross, just as at the Jordan River, there is a tearing open and a voice that proclaims Jesus as God's Son. Clothed in Christ's righteousness, made a new creation by the Holy Spirit in baptism, we are able – after our broken-hearted remorse and our falling short known in witnessing his betrayal and death – we are able to renew with joy our commitment to living God's ways at the resurrection on Sunday. We cannot get to this Easter joy without first traveling to the cross. Our thread leads Jesus to the cross. It is only in experiencing his death with him that we can take hold of God's thread, freely given, and let it lead us back out with him into life.