

“Into the Storm”

Mark 8:31-38 ¹

On September 29, 2015, the containership *El Faro* left Jacksonville, Florida, headed for Puerto Rico. Tropical storm *Juaquin* was churning slightly east of the route, but the captain of *El Faro* thought he could avoid it.

Two days later, though, *Juaquin* was a category 3 hurricane, and *El Faro*'s planned route intersected the expected path of the eyewall. *El Faro*'s captain still thought he could make it, but when the ship encountered seas as high as forty feet, it began to take on water and the ship was lost, with all thirty-three crew members. The captain gambled with sailing into the storm . . . and lost.

Parts of that story bear some similarity to what was happening in today's text. If you'll look at the four verses prior to where we began in Mark 8:31, you'll see that Jesus and His disciples were in the region of Caesarea Philippi. They were as far north as one could be and still be in Israel, near the foot of Mount Hermon, Israel's tallest peak.²

Jesus has just asked the disciples “*Who do people say that I am?*” and they answered, “*John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, one of the prophets.*” Then Jesus asked the Twelve **Life's Most Important Question:** “*But you, who do you say that I am?*”

Peter answered, “*You are the Messiah.*” And then Jesus surprisingly and strictly warned the Twelve to keep this information to themselves.

Jesus went on to give Simon his new name, “Rock,” or, as we better know it, “Peter.” By the word, “rock,” Jesus made reference both to Peter's accurate assessment of Jesus' identity and to Peter's faith in Jesus; but Jesus was also referring to the “rock” at whose base they stood—Mount Hermon. They were standing in that region the Jews considered to be “the gates of hell,” and Jesus was putting the powers of Darkness on notice: “***The Kingdom of God is at hand. I have come to take back what is mine.***”

The time had come for heading into the storm. Less than a week later, Jesus would be transfigured on that same mountain, revealing His true, heavenly glory, and talking with Moses and Elijah “*of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem*” (Luke 9:31).

Peter's confession and Jesus' Transfiguration were “Ground Zero” in the Cosmic Battle that determines the future of the Universe. This is D-Day. And, as it was with D-Day, although the War does not end at once, its end has now been determined. Jesus' death on Calvary's cross is going to be the unexpected move that seals the doom of Darkness. But I anticipate the Story.

Our text this morning begins in the very next verse, where, after Peter's affirmation that Jesus is in fact God's long-promised Messiah, Jesus begins to explain to His disciples that God's

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 24, 2018. Parallel passages are Matthew 16:21-28 and Luke 9:22-27.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² Today, Hermon is the highest point in Syria.

Messiah is a very different kind of King than what they have expected: *Then he began to teach them that it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and rise after three days. He spoke openly about this* (Mark 8:31-32a).

Here, as He so often did, Jesus referred to Himself as “the Son of Man.” Jesus called Himself “the Son of Man” over eighty times in the Gospels, and no one else, whether friend or foe, used the term of Him. When Jesus used this term, He was referring to a famous Messianic prophecy in the book of Daniel:

And suddenly one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him. He was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom; so that those of every people, nation, and language should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

Jesus applied this verse to Himself when He was on trial before the High Priest, and *the high priest tore his robes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy”* (Mark 14:61-64). It seems to me that this gives us a clue about why Jesus told the disciples not to reveal who He was after Peter’s confession.

In the New Testament, the demons clearly know Who Jesus is (e.g., Mark 1:24); but they do not know God’s eternal Plan. They intend to have Jesus killed, and now that He has thrown down the gauntlet, they will do so quickly. *But the forces of Darkness did not realize that it was through Jesus’ death and resurrection that they would be defeated.*

As Paul would later write, “**None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory**” (1 Corinthians 2:8). And so a Storm is coming, and a trap is laid, but it is neither the storm nor the trap that Jesus’ enemies think it is. The Secret of the Ages must be kept secure . . . for now.

When Jesus spoke about it being necessary for the Son of Man to suffer, be rejected, be killed, and be resurrected, He was describing a Messiah *very different* from what the Jews—and His disciples—expected. Even though this description comes straight out of Isaiah 53, the Jews had rejected this description in favor of what they imagined to be the reestablishment of the glory of the kingdom of David and Solomon.³

There have been hints about the nature of the coming Storm, such as Simeon’s prophecy when Jesus was an infant (Luke 2:35) and Jesus’ own hint about “the bridegroom being taken away” (Luke 5:35), but this is the first time Jesus has spoken clearly and plainly about the approaching Conflict, and the pushback was swift and strong.⁴

Although Peter had perceived that Jesus was God’s Messiah, he was still caught up in the vision of the Messiah that was current in those days, and he refused to entertain any possibility of Jesus’ suffering. Peter most likely spoke for all of the Twelve when he audaciously and

³ See 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.

⁴ Jesus told the Twelve about His Passion on three occasions, but they completely missed each one: Mark 8:31-38, 9:31, 10:33-34; Matthew 16:21, 17:22-23, 20:17-19; Luke 9:21-22, 24:7; cp. John 2:19, 3:14. After the first telling, Peter rebuked Jesus; after the second, they argued about which of them was the greatest; after the third, James and John asked to be seated at His right- and left-hand in the Kingdom.

vehemently asserted that he understood more about what God was up to than did the Messiah Himself. Peter rebuked Jesus with astonishing presumption, and Jesus returned the favor.

Having just given Peter the strong nickname of “Rock,” Jesus now called him a stone that causes one to stumble. “*Get behind me, Satan!*” Jesus told Peter. Then, in the remainder of our text, Jesus essentially told Peter and the Twelve, “Don’t stand in my way. Follow me to the cross.”

This encounter in Mark 8 forms the hinge of Mark’s Gospel. From here on out, we head into the Storm. And in the Synoptic Gospels, the Story begins, hinges, and ends with Jesus facing crafty and cunning temptations from Satan.

In the beginning, just as soon as Jesus began His public ministry, Satan met Him in the wilderness to try to derail the whole project (Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:8-10); here, as the time for battle comes near, Satan tried again to get Jesus to abandon the path of suffering and choose the way of human glory; and finally, as Judas’ betrayal drew near, Satan tempted Jesus once more to give the whole thing up (John 12:27, 13:27).

Here at Caesarea Philippi, with Peter’s confession and confrontation over, Jesus called the crowd closer so they could hear what He was about to tell the disciples. What the disciples were about to hear was for everyone to know, not just for the Twelve . . . and it is for us, too.

Jesus told them three things: (1) **DENY** yourself; (2) **TAKE UP** your cross; and (3), **FOLLOW** Me. Let’s look at these briefly, because we tend to misunderstand and to redefine each of them to suit ourselves.

First, **Deny Yourself**. We have many ways of misunderstanding this one. Sometimes we think that we should cultivate a weak, non-assertive personality, letting other people run over us and having no desires of our own. Sometimes we think we should deny ourselves something, such as chocolate or television . . . but only temporarily, of course. Some folk think the purpose here has to do with asceticism or some kind of self-flagellation; but each of these completely misses the point.

There was nothing weak about Jesus. He was physically strong—a carpenter. He was spiritually strong—the demons and the storms fled before Him. And He was emotionally strong—He walked into the confrontation in Jerusalem openly and unafraid.

Given these characteristics, Jesus is not the Commander of a collection of wimps. Jesus calls us to join an invading army that is wresting the planet back from the forces of Darkness. The denial to which we are called is the denial required of a military force. Those who join Jesus voluntarily choose to give our complete and total allegiance to Him, no matter what the assignment may be. The idea here is the chorus we sing from time to time:

I’ll say yes, Lord, yes, to Your will and to Your way.
I’ll say yes, Lord, yes, I will trust You and obey.
When Your Spirit speaks to me, with my whole heart, I’ll agree,
And my answer will be YES, Lord, YES!⁵

Second, **Take Up Your Cross**. Jesus was not talking about jewelry here. He was not talking about some bodily affliction, some problem in our family, some persistent irritation, or some financial difficulty. Jesus was talking about blood, suffering, and death.

⁵ Lyn Keesecker, “Yes, Lord, Yes” (Manna Music, 1983).

In those days, crucifixion was a well-known and much-dreaded form of execution. It was cruel, disgusting, and degrading. There was nothing good about it. Jesus told His disciples—and us—that the possibility of such shameful death is not a detour or a side road when we follow Him. It is the Main Road.

The point is not that we are to seek such suffering. This is not a masochistic path. But it is a counter-cultural path, and those who choose to follow Jesus and to stand against the principalities and powers of this world can expect to be opposed, sometimes violently.

Jesus was not talking about suffering from the forces of nature. He was talking about forceful and violent human opposition. When Dr. King chose to go to Selma, when he chose to go to Birmingham, when he chose to go to Montgomery, when he chose to go to Memphis, he knew what he was choosing.

I'll say yes, Lord, yes, to Your will and to Your way.
I'll say yes, Lord, yes, I will trust You and obey.
When Your Spirit speaks to me, with my whole heart, I'll agree,
And my answer will be YES, Lord, YES.⁶

Finally, **Follow Me**. Jesus didn't mince words once He headed into the Storm. He told His disciples, "*If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you*" (John 15:18).

"Be on your guard! They will hand you over to local courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues. You will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a witness to them. . . . So when they arrest you and hand you over, don't worry beforehand what you will say, but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it isn't you speaking but the Holy Spirit.

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of my name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:9-13).

When many of those who followed Jesus heard these words, they said, "This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?"

So Jesus said to the Twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?"

*Simon Peter answered, "**Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life**"* (John 6:60, 67-68).

These are challenging words, indeed; but Jesus went on to provide good reason for obeying them: "*Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me and the gospel will save it. For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life? . . . For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*" (Mark 8:35-38).

Jesus told the disciples, and the crowd, and us with them, that to choose physical or material safety instead of faithfulness to Him and to His commands is a fool's bargain. We brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it (1 Timothy 6:7). All that crosses the Final Boundary is our character and other people we have brought to Jesus.

⁶ I'm reminded of the last words of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, where Sidney Carton, as he steps to the guillotine to die in another's place, says to himself, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

For those who have been faithful, when Jesus returns in glory, He will say, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!*” (Matthew 25:34). But for those who choose another way, they will inherit what they, too, have chosen, but they will find that in their fool’s bargain, they have chosen to be separated from God, forever.

Well, time gets away. As we think about today’s text, we need to remember that, like the disciples, we are prone to try to amend Jesus’ teaching to suit ourselves, especially when it comes to sacrifice and suffering. When the Spirit speaks to us about such things, we’re prone to change the channel.

We are not to seek suffering, but neither are we to reject it, if the mission God assigns to us requires it. And, like Jesus, we may sometimes find that our friends and family are among those who most stridently try to dissuade us from following God’s call.

God has promised that “*whenever you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear this command behind you: ‘This is the way. Walk in it’*” (Isaiah 30:21). We don’t get such guidance every hour of the day, but God gives it when we need it.

Sometimes we don’t hear God’s voice because we don’t expect to hear it, and we’re not listening. Sometimes we don’t hear God’s voice because we have already decided to follow our own path, not God’s Way, and we’re not listening. Sometimes we don’t hear God’s voice because our hearts are not in the right condition, and we’re not listening.

We are harboring sin and unforgiveness in our hearts. We are stiff-necked and hard-hearted. We are seeking our own kingdoms and not God’s Kingdom. We do not wish to hear. But it is a fool’s bargain.

As J.R.R. Tolkien’s book, *The Hobbit*, begins, Gandalf, the good wizard, shows up at the home of a little creature (a “Hobbit”) named Bilbo Baggins with this announcement: “I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it’s very difficult to find anyone.”

“I should think so—in these parts!” answered Bilbo. “We are plain, quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can’t think what anybody sees in them.”⁷

God’s call to us often sparks a similar conversation. We become aware of something God wants us to do, but because the assignment seems likely to be uncomfortable, we’re inclined to say NO.

But here’s the deal: While Bilbo Baggins didn’t want any adventures, thank you very much, there comes a time when it’s time to quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death, when maintaining the status quo becomes disobedience, when fear must stop determining our decisions, when we become willing to head into the Storm with Jesus.

So, my friend, as you sit here this morning, *what would YOU do if you were not afraid?*

Add to your believing deeds that prove it true.
Knowing Christ as Savior, make Him Master, too.
Follow in His footsteps, go where He has trod;

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 18.

In the world's great trouble risk yourself for God.⁸

What would you do if you were not afraid?

Amen, and Amen.

⁸ Bryan Leech, "Let Your Heart Be Broken," to the tune WYE VALLEY.