

# Again & Again: We Are To Listen

## Second Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:3-38  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
February 28, 2021

The assigned lectionary Gospel reading for this Second Sunday in Lent is not an easy one. For most, it brings up many more questions than it answers. And throughout the ages, there have been different interpretations. Nevertheless, listen closely as this passage is read, and think about the questions that you bring to this text.

Read Mark 8:27-37

Overall, today's Gospel reading is where the rubber meets the road when comparing the people's expectations of a messiah with Jesus' own understanding, and the resulting implications on our own discipleship. Since the Season of Lent is meant to lead us to the cross and eventually to the empty tomb, this passage orients us to the road ahead. So as Jesus and his disciples are traveling along, Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" After they respond with what they have heard, Jesus asks a much more personal question, one that is still addressed to you and me to answer for ourselves, "**Who do you say that I am?**"

Peter declares, "You are the Messiah." This Hebrew word literally translates as, "the Anointed", or in the Greek, "the Christ". Well, big bonus points for Peter, he gets this one right. The only problem with that is we learn his understanding of what that title means isn't the same as Jesus'. **While Peter understands that Jesus is the Christ, he doesn't understand what it means for Jesus to be the Christ.**

In first century Palestine, a prevailing view was that the Messiah would come and lead a military triumph over the Roman imperial occupiers, thus restoring the majestic kingdom founded by David a thousand years earlier. Jesus, however, counters that understanding when he describes the true nature of his **messiahship. Instead of coming forth in a blaze of glory with swords and chariots, deliverance will come in the form of Jesus' own great suffering, rejection, and even death.**

Hearing Jesus foretell this agonizing path must have made no sense to Peter. Since it seems to be both shameful and disgraceful, Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him. Oops. Instead, Peter finds himself being rebuked by Jesus in front of the other disciples. Jesus draws the strongest possible contrast between Peter's ideas of messiahship and his own, identifying Peter's with Satan. Jesus was not calling Peter Satan, but rather was acknowledging that the influence and inspiration behind what Peter was saying was from Satan – literally, the Adversary. In other words, Peter was encouraging Jesus to take another path to messiahship, one that was easier, more comfortable, and hopefully less demanding, and therefore less demanding on them as his disciples. It is in that spirit that Peter is rebuked for being unable to discern the difference between what Mark terms as human things and divine things.

The interaction between Jesus and Peter also reveals something else about our human nature. **Hard truths are often difficult to listen to, let alone to take in and accept.** Hard truths often challenge our own preconceptions and notions of what is real, and of

what must be faced. Hard truths are often threatening to our own sense of comfort when they push against our simple acceptance of the way things are. **Peter is being told to listen. Again and again, we too are reminded of the importance of listening, especially when hard truths are involved.**

In her commentary on this passage, found in the resource I'm using as a guide during Lent this year, the Rev. Denise Anderson, a Presbyterian who I introduced in last week's sermon, writes: "The Lenten journey calls us to examine the things in which our hearts are invested. How important is comfort to us? Would we be willing to listen to hard truths and be changed by them even if it proved to be difficult? Or are we committed to the status quo because, though it may be imperfect, it's at least familiar. Again and again", she concludes, "we are implored to listen, especially when what we hear is unsettling."

**I can think of no better example at the present than what many of us are learning and struggling with when it comes to the complex issues of racial justice and equity, and our own internalized and often unrecognized sense of entitlement and privilege.** This is especially true in finally coming to the realization that in this country we are living in the 400-year old hierarchical legacy that puts a higher value on the lives of some people over the lives of others, based primarily on the arbitrary distinction of the color of their skin, which was then engrained into our laws and practices.

On Thursday night of this past week, our College Hill Book Study Group dove head first into **Ibram X. Kendi's bestselling 2019 book, "How To Be An Antiracist"**. I perhaps spoke a bit too passionately, perhaps even a bit too judgmentally, for which I apologize, when **I implored our group to approach this book, and the issue of racism itself, less as something to critique against our own understandings and preconceptions (like we rightfully often do in our approach to the Bible and basically everything else we read), and instead simply listen to what is being spoken through the words and experiences of this and other Black authors.** Listening to hard truths from Black voices about their experiences in this country is something we, as followers of Jesus, must be willing to do. And yes, especially when they are threatening or challenging to our own understandings and experiences. **For if we don't listen deeply, transformation cannot take place – for us as individuals, as a community of faith, as a society and nation. The changing of direction in our own hearts and minds, the very definition of repentance, will find nothing but roadblocks if we aren't willing to evaluate our own opinions, and especially our natural response of defensiveness, long enough to truly listen.**

And no, that's not easy. Then again, Jesus never said it would be. For after his rebuke of Peter, he invites the entire gathered crowd to listen to his next words, **"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"** (v. 34). This is another difficult saying of Jesus that needs careful interpretation. Let me start with the part about denying oneself, especially in light of the command to love our neighbor *as ourselves*. A popular phrase used in Alcoholics Anonymous goes like this: **"It doesn't mean think less of yourself, just think of yourself less."** One biblical commentator puts it this way, "In the overall flow of the narrative, the implication here is that for Jesus, Peter's view of messiahship amounts to a form of self-centered grasping, whereas Jesus has come for the 180-degree opposite reason: to live for God and neighbor in love; to give, not grasp." This finds familiar expression in the famous **prayer attributed to St. Francis**, which includes the words: "let me not seek so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as

to love, for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are raised to eternal life.”

**Jesus’ understanding of messiahship, unlike the popular understanding, wasn’t about self-centered gain. It’s not about control and conquest, but love and compassion. That’s counter culture to this very day.** And in following that path ourselves, Jesus warns us it will not necessarily be the easy way. That’s what it means to take up our cross, to remain faithful in the midst of struggle, even oppression.

In order to put an exclamation point on the theme of this sermon, “Again & Again: We Are Called To Listen”, I’m going to close with a poem written by Sarah Are. She is the remarkable poet and author of the liturgy found in today’s worship bulletin, and every week during Lent this year. She serves as the associate pastor for Youth and Young Adults at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church in Dallas. Her poem is entitled, “Truth That Ricochets”.

### Truth That Ricochets

I went to a lecture once—  
 An interfaith conversation with interfaith  
     leaders.  
 Whispers bounced off the church’s tile floors  
 As people shuffled into place,  
 Carrying hope alongside assumptions—  
 Mixed into pockets like loose change.

About halfway through the evening,  
 A young woman in a blue hijab began  
     speaking.  
 She was the youngest person on the panel,  
 Seated far to the left. You might almost  
     miss her  
 If you weren’t paying attention;  
 But not here, not when she spoke.

In quiet determination she told us of fear  
     and persecution.  
 She told us of hatred and racial slurs,  
 Thrown at her people from car windows  
     like bombs.  
 It was a truth I did not know,  
 And that truth ricocheted like sunlight  
     through the cathedral windows,  
 Touching almost everyone that day.

Then a man in the back, who could have  
     been me—  
*Who has been me—*  
 Approached the microphone and said,

“Your people are persecuted. You live in  
 fear. You are battered by hate.  
 If that is true, then why am I just now  
 hearing about it?  
 Why is your story not on the news? Why  
 have you not spoken up about it?”

And the air was still, partly because we held  
 our breath in anticipation,  
 And partly because the Spirit slows her  
 dance when we stand at the edge  
 of truth.  
 The woman in the blue hijab leaned into the  
 microphone  
 And whispered with a quiet strength that  
 can only come from years of practice:  
 “We are screaming.”

If there is one truth in my life  
 That unfolds again and again,  
 It is the need to listen.

For again and again, I will try, with good  
 intentions,  
 To act and walk with love.  
 But again and again, I will make mistakes.  
 Again and again, I will say the wrong thing.  
 Again and again, they will call me Peter,  
 And again and again, they will be right.

So again and again,  
 I will pray for a truth that ricochets,  
 For ears that will listen,  
 And for space to hold truth.

If people are screaming,  
 And to be clear—people are screaming—  
 I do not want to miss it.

Let us not miss it either.

Amen.



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