

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.15.25

Isaiah 50:4-9a

⁴The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. ⁵The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. ⁶I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ⁷The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; ⁸he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. ⁹It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them 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. 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.”

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. For 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (449)

You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

Someone should have told Jesus that.

What he chooses to say quite openly and what he urges people to be quiet about, amiright?

This passage from the Gospel of Mark is around the halfway point. From this point on, Jesus would teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, and the scribes, and the chief priests, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Prior to this, he'd seemed more like a wonder-worker, someone around whom good things happened and apparently because of whom good things happened. He healed the sick, restored people to clear-

mindedness where once they'd been possessed by something disordered and terrifying. People came to him with their sick or their suffering, and in his presence all was made right.

And about it all, he told the people not to say anything to anyone.

But of course, they did. How could they not? The people in those people's lives would notice the difference, I can only imagine. They'd have asked, how did this happen? How did you come to walk again? How did you come to be clear of mind, returned to yourself? And the ones to whom it had happened would say how it happened. They weren't going to lie.

So, crowds began to follow, and more and more people would bring their people, carry them on mats, lower them through the thatched rooves of the houses where Jesus had come in, lower them down because the crowd was too thick. There'd be no passing through that, not with this stretcher for the one who can't walk, who now would be made free to walk.

Here, though, as he went on to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he was only with the disciples, so he had a quiet moment to ask, "Who do people say that I am?" It's as if he knew people would be talking about him. Even though he'd urged quiet, there's only so long you keep people from saying what they see.

The disciples' answers were what you'd expect. They fit Jesus into the frameworks they had. "You're one of the prophets." "You're John the Baptizer." Only Peter suspected something that had no precedent except in its expectation: "You are the Messiah."

And about this, he *sternly* ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

The urging to quiet was becoming more intense.

But with this insight that Peter had come to, and the other disciples might have come to as well, now that it had been spoken out loud, Jesus began to teach them, as if with this they were ready. He began to teach them about this other aspect of being the Messiah, the suffering servant aspect, recalling the unnamed servant in the prophecy of Isaiah. It was with this that Jesus seemed to figure they were ready to hear about how such messianic power is actually to show up in the world, to what purpose this power is to be put. He must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, and the scribes, and the chief priests, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

And *this* he said quite openly, as if it was *this* that Jesus wanted more widely known of him. Vinegar.

Because he wasn't going to stop. The must-ness of his suffering, the necessity of it: it's because he wasn't going to stop making manifest the kingdom of God wherever he went. Really, it might have been that he *couldn't* stop. Like you: can you stop casting a shadow on sunny day?

Because that's apparently how it was for Jesus and the kingdom of God. According to Mark, there was something irrepressible about the kingdom when Jesus came along. It would take hold. It would take over. Like your own shadow on sunny day, it couldn't help but to be cast. He couldn't help but to have it cast. It's not something Jesus *did* as much as something he couldn't not do. And by this, we come to know what the kingdom of God is *like*. It is healing for the sick, and restoration for the possessed or the outcast, and freedom for the bound up, and equality for all people.

See, this world has come to be occupied by spirits entirely other than holy. According to Mark, there's something persistently hostile going on here, an occupation. There's something that creeps in and intertwines with everything that makes power relations oppressive, and interpersonal relations confused and sometimes cruel. It's not just Rome that is the occupying force, though they certainly do make such spirits manifestly clear. Their clanking armor, their crushing boots, their hammer and nails on ever-reused wooden crosses, casting their terrifying shadows over people just trying to live their lives. It wasn't just Rome, it was an occupation more ephemeral and yet just as real, that could creep in anywhere and everywhere, always looking for an opportune time, among any people and all people. It was an occupation that could cast its menacing shadow anywhere and everywhere.

But Jesus wouldn't stop arriving as some other sort of spirit, what in other gospels would more frequently be called the Holy Spirit. And for this inability to stop, or for this refusal to stop, others would stop him, the people who were invested in the way things are, the religious authorities come to cooperate with the imperial authorities. It *must* be this way, that Jesus would suffer and be killed, because there was coming a clash, and Jesus wasn't about to acquiesce. The "must-ness" of it wasn't some divine need. This wasn't a matter of God needing Jesus to suffer and die, as is often confessed among Christians. This wasn't a matter of God wanting a blood sacrifice so God would be less angry. This was a matter of the occupying forces of this world refusing to let free all which Jesus made free and Jesus refusing to stop making free, refusing to stop making the kingdom of God come real.

He must be stopped trying to set free this world that was bound, so strangely and surprisingly unfree. He must be stopped because he wouldn't stop himself, he perhaps *couldn't* stop himself. So, others would do stop him—first religious authorities, the elders and chief priests and scribes, and then the imperial authorities, the governor and the king and their countless, interchangeable centurions.

He said all this quite openly. See, it's *this* that he said quite openly.

Vinegar.

So, Peter told him to shut up. "Shut up! This must never happen to you."

The verb is a rough one: *epitimaō*. It's twice here translated "rebuke," but the original is quite a bit rougher than that. This is what Jesus is said to have said in shutting up the impure spirit in the synagogue back in Nazareth. This is what he's said to have said in telling all the impure spirits who've recognized him along the way, telling them to shut up about their calling him the Son of God. Mark uses it in naming what Jesus did to the storm on the lake when he was trying to sleep in the bow of the boat, that the storm, having awoken him and moreover having threatened and frightened the disciples, should shut up. And now it's here, though on Peter's lips.

Because, the Messiah! The whole point of the Messiah is *not* that he would suffer, but that he'd be victorious and by extension those closest to him would also be victorious, winners of the world. The whole point was not that he'd lead to humiliation, for himself and his people, but that he'd bring victory. I mean, how could it be that, in a face-off between the powers and principalities of this world and the will and way of God, this world would win?

What good is a god who won't put up a fight?

Then there's the fact that this was Peter's friend, that Peter's refusal to hear this wasn't just about his idea of the Messiah being violated, or his need of the Messiah being denied, but also something even more of *pathos*, that this one who'd apparently suffer was his friend. "God forbid it. This must never happen to you."

And how tempting it must have been to Jesus, that this must never happen to him. Because he might have had his moments of resolve. And he might his moments of fear, fear of this thing you'd be a fool not to fear.

In Mark's gospel, there's nothing of content when Jesus confronted the devil in the wilderness. At the temptation by which he was burnished for service, Mark's gospel has but a forty-day void. In Matthew and Luke, we get more of content, we learn what the devil is thought to have said—and it's all akin to this, that Jesus should wield power in service of himself, that he should use power in such a way as guarantees itself, that safeguards itself and makes it so the one with it never has to suffer.

That's false, of course. Power can never truly safeguard from suffering. At best, it can forestall it, foist it on others for a time, maybe even a very long time. But eventually, power used

that way turns on itself. It burns itself out. It isolates the one with it, and fills him with fear, and eventually, eventually self-destructs, while all along the way there is so much other-destruction.

But it sure is tempting, because meanwhile you can get a lot of goodies.

In Mark's gospel, we get nothing of content about that temptation. Nothing so specific shows up until here, when Peter has given voice to it.

Jesus recognizes it right away. He tells Peter to shut up, treats him like he did any other corrupting agent, and then, "Get behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." You are urging worldly power, while what's called for truly to save is divine power, shared power, power deployed for the sake of abundant life in a spirit of universal love.

Jesus might have done the opposite here: he might have urged people to speak about all his wonder-working and to keep quiet about its attending costs. Front with honey and all. Get the people in the door first, right? Any good salesperson will tell you as much.

The fact that he didn't makes me trust him all the more. I want to know what I'm getting into. I want you to know too. We might have to suffer for what we love. Indeed, that's the proof of the truth of love, that we're willing to suffer that our love might live, a willingness that doesn't even need to be fought for and won but that simply flows, so powerful is love itself.

What is it that you suffer for? What is it in your life that you sacrifice ease or comfort or your good name in order that you might risk taking part in something truly excellent, truly good? As you sit another hour in that uncomfortable pew, take a moment and ask yourself. I'm sure there's an answer.

Thanks be to God.