

Mark 8:27–38

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In the texts for Lent, too, the good Lord pushes our thumbs off the scale to set out pure promise, one right after the other.

This is Adam's sin, of course: we don't want God to be God. So we contrive all kinds of defenses against him, usually trying to push ourselves into the center one way or another, or, failing the center, at least to get to the margins, so that we have some place to hide. The trouble with this strategy is that it backfires on us, one way or the other. Either we become convinced that we alone are pious and faithful and everybody else is at a loss, and if only the world would become like us the whole operation would be so much better; or, more likely, we get lost in ourselves, become convicted of our unbelief, and have no hope whatsoever.

So fairly regularly in Scripture the good Lord rears back and delivers promises of such purity that we can't get our hands on them and control them in any way, shape, or form. You could say that good money drives out bad money. The purity of Christ's promises, of God's promises, of the promises delivered by the Holy Spirit, is such that it exposes the fraudulence of our false securities and false hopes. And when our false hopes have been broken, we turn and are called in faith to the promise. We begin to hear the promises for all they are worth.

So we have some beauties this week. We can start with Genesis 17, another statement of God's covenant with Abraham, in which God does exactly what I was describing: he pushes the promise to such a degree that no qualification is possible. From there we go to Psalm 22, which we will hear again in Passion Week. Here faith, the creature of the promise, calls out to the God who has promised, expecting good, unqualified good. That's a beauty on the other side. From there we go on to Romans 5, how about that, one promise right after the other: "while we still were sinners." It's just fabulous. And finally Mark 8, where Christ Jesus promises to take us under the sign of the cross and bring us right into the depths.

So we'll follow these texts, starting with the supporting texts, and then go to Mark 8.

Abraham on His Face: Genesis 17

If we begin with Genesis 17, we can see Abraham falling flat on his face twice. The first time, it is the overpowering presence of God that does him in. He loses his footing; he falls down before the good Lord, who comes once more to reiterate the promises already made in Genesis 12.

I sometimes suspect we have different editions of the promise delivered to Abraham, because as soon as you start making covenants with humankind, things get a little unstable. But this one has more the quality of a suzerainty treaty, as one of my old professors used to call it: a treaty made by a powerful king with a much weaker one, in which the powerful king takes responsibility for the whole business. That is exactly what happens here. Abraham is called to be blameless before the good Lord. But if you look at how that blamelessness is going to be achieved or realized in Abraham, it is clear that it is not coming from him, or being created in him, or even being called out of him. It is God's work, and as God's work it is reliable. So this blamelessness is a function of the promise itself. This is what happens when the good Lord goes to work. He makes the promise, and the promise in fact clears the way for itself, so that Abraham has no alternative but to hear it.

The second time he falls on his face is at the word at the end of the text. The text has been edited, or cut, we could say, in such a way as to take off one of the most hilarious points in all of Scripture. This is when Abraham realizes the promise God is making, that Sarah will bear a son. That's too much. It's not only a fit of the giggles; it's guffawing laughter that literally knocks him to the ground. Such a promise: the promise of land, the promise of progeny, the promise above all of a son who will make Abraham a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

So this promise establishes the call of Abraham and the call of Sarai, whose names are now changed, from Abram to Abraham and from Sarai to Sarah, to emphasize that they come now as promise bearers, carrying the hope of the new creation into the earth. This is God's response to all the disaster of Genesis 1–11. He is promising to bring something new through the loins of these two people, Abraham and Sarah, to make of them a great nation.

Faith Calls Out: Psalm 22

In Psalm 22 we see the other side of the promise. When promises are spoken, either they create faith, "Is that ever great? I can hardly wait," or they create unbelief, "That'll never

happen. Good luck on that one.” Faith is a creature of the promise. It is created by the promises.

So now we see faith calling out in Psalm 22. First of all it turns to the character of God: “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.” They cry to him and he hears them, because he is the God of the promise and therefore utterly trustworthy. “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!”

So the psalmist begins to recite the characteristics of God that have become known in the narrative of God’s dealings with Israel. And as he recites them, he is, by the power of the Spirit, working in us the faith that believes. “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, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down.”

Now here is a very interesting passage. One of my cousins out in California passed away the other day, and we got to see his funeral online. He had become a Jew in marrying a Jewish woman; he had converted to Judaism. And so we heard a vision of his immortality: his genes will continue in the next generation. Here Israel’s hope is much stronger and more powerful. “To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down.” There is the anticipation that God’s power reaches beyond life itself, into the grave. “Before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn.”

Both the dead and the unborn: neither category is beyond the reach of the good Lord. He is a God of promise who reaches into the grave itself, into the womb itself, to create the conditions in which faith blooms, to create a new heart within us. So this psalm is stretching the promise, pushing it to its limits, and rejoicing in the power of God to deal with us in this way.

While We Were Enemies: Romans 5

If you want to speak of the promise being pushed for all it’s worth, we should look at one of its great expressions, in Romans 5:1–11.

“Therefore.” This is a magnificent “therefore,” one of the great “therefores” you can ever hear. “Therefore” speaks of a condition which, having been created, bears fruit in those who benefit from it. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We should look at this closely. One of my dear teachers, Roy Alvin Harrisville, likes to feast on a textual variant noted in the apparatus of Nestle, in which “we have peace with God” becomes a bare imperative: “Therefore let us have peace with God.” In fact, running to the textual variant to protect yourself from the purity of the promise is something of the problem. That’s the old Adam again, worried sick that God is going to get away with something, that God is not going to behave according to human standards and is going to throw grace all over. Well, in fact that is exactly what he has done.

Justified: in the original meaning of the term, you have been brought into alignment with the good Lord. You have been lined up with him in such a way that his grace flows through to you and is carried out in you. “Since we are justified by faith,” the fruit that flows to you is this: peace with God. He is no longer your opponent, no longer someone to be overcome, no longer someone to satisfy or appease, no longer someone watching over the law to make sure he gets everything out of it he possibly can. We have peace with God. Why? Because he has laid down his life. He has given and bestowed himself in Christ Jesus, and for that reason peace comes to us: it is given to us, granted to us, created in us, manifested in us, carried out in us by the will and purposes of God. So this peace is not ours. It’s not something we achieve or manufacture. It is done to us, given to us, worked in us.

“Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” You see the logic of flow, of alignment, of being set in the proper relationship. We have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. This grace, charis, the power of the resurrection, has flowed into us and moved into us, and is literally creating us anew.

“And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings.” Why? Because this grace has moved into us, and everything that contends against it appears powerless, or merely puts it in bold relief. And here is a wonderful sequence: “knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” In the midst of the suffering of everyday life we gain new dimensions: hope, patience, understanding. We are moved outside ourselves in such a way that we begin to anticipate good. “And hope does not disappoint us,”

does not put us to shame. Why? “Because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.” It is pouring down into us out of the sheer goodness of God.

And then, if that’s not enough, Paul continues: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” Now watch how the descriptors change in this passage. “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

Weakness, which is a category of strength, has yielded itself to a new category, one that speaks of a relationship in which we have fallen short: from “while we were weak” to “while we were sinners.”

Still Paul is not satisfied with that category. He wants to keep going and pushing it. “Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood,” aligned and brought into the right relation, “will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” Weakness has yielded to a statement of broken relationship, “while we were sinners,” and now that has been squared again: “while we were enemies.” “But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Everything has broken loose in this alignment. God has been bringing home the goods, working on us, re-creating, doing what God does. So: promise multiplied on promise, our condition getting worse and worse while God does more and more. Lots of fun. Through the whole thing Paul is emphasizing the power of charis to break beyond all human limitations and all conditions, to create anew, and to bring the sheer goodness and power of God to us.

At the Gates of Hades: Mark 8

With that we descend, literally, into one of the great promises in the Gospel of Mark. Here, as much as in any text in Mark, it is important to notice the location: “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.” Caesarea Philippi is the location of a cave traditionally considered the entrance to Hades. It is at the very bottom of things. And so Christ Jesus is located at the bottom here, right at the entrance to hell, where everything goes down into the depths.

Standing there at the mouth of the cave, he asks the question that is the question of the Gospel of Mark: Who is this man? What's going on here? Mark pushes this question. It arises early; we've seen it come forward in Mark 1. How can he speak with such authority? How does he do these things? How is it that the demons obey him? Who is this guy, and what's he doing? And we are going to get a partial answer to the question here.

He is with his disciples now at this low point, right at the entrance where everything turns toward the bottom, and just here he asks, "Who do people say that I am?" No doubt the disciples have been asking that question, and no doubt everybody who has dealt with him has been asking it too. They are wondering what in the world is going on here, how he can be spoken of in such a way, and how he should be spoken of.

"And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'" They are doing what people do. They are bringing forward categories, looking to see how these categories work, and looking to see how he meshes with previously established categories, whether there's a fit or not. When we are at home, dear Carolyn plays Husker Du with our little grandchildren, a game in which there are duplicates of all the pieces and you turn them over until you match one with the other. In effect they are playing Husker Du here. There are categories laid down, and they are asking what category he fits in. So they recite the possibilities. Some say John the Baptist: it looks as if, after Herod's beheading, he has been restored and is back at work. Some say Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, or, failing that, maybe one of the prophets. They are sorting through the categories, seeing whether he fits, how he fits, and how they should deal with him in light of the categories.

"He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" Here we have it. This is the question of faith, the decisive question: Who do you say that I am? What do you think? It is not just a question of identity here. It is a question of alignment, of where we stand in relation to him, and we'll get a partial answer.

Peter has a sense that there is something more going on here, and so Peter blurts out a confession that he will later repudiate. He has half the answer, but not the whole answer. The whole answer, or ninety percent of it, won't be available until we hear it from Jesus' executioner, the centurion standing at the cross, who says, "Truly this man was God's Son!" "Was": that's his mistake. The Holy Spirit will correct it on Easter morning: truly this man is. But for now Peter gets this close: "You are the Messiah." So Peter confesses his faith that Jesus is God expressing himself in the flesh and blood of a man, that he is God coming right out

into the open to save, to deliver his people from the powers of death, distortion, and destruction that have held and still hold the creation captive. He is the one in whom God is decisively re-creating, remaking the creation.

Get Behind Me, Satan

And now Jesus springs a surprise. “And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” Well, that’s not so surprising. All through Mark’s Gospel he has been able to do everything except keep a secret. All through Mark’s Gospel he has been attempting to keep it quiet, and now it’s breaking out.

“Then he began to teach them.” He will teach this three times, and the disciples’ first reaction is very much like the second and the third. “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.”

One of the greatest things Luther ever wrote is his commentary on the Magnificat, one of my dearly beloved writings of Luther. This is what he says very early in it: the eyes of men are high and lifted up, aspiring after what is lofty and great; therefore to God alone belongs that kind of seeing which looks into the depths, with their need and misery and squalor.

So here we see the difference. Peter is reading things in a human way. “You are the Messiah”: he has gotten that far, but he hasn’t gotten far enough to realize everything he is saying when he makes this confession. And so when Jesus announces for the first time that he is going away to suffer and die, Peter breaks out in opposition. “And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” He is smart enough not to rebuke his master in front of everybody else. Maybe he has taken some lessons in not shaming those in authority. Maybe he has become wise in the ways of the world and knows better than to take Jesus down in front of everybody. But he doesn’t know the bottom of it, and so he doesn’t know the truth of what Jesus has spoken, and he begins to rebuke him.

“But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’” Peter’s rebuke comes right back on him. These are harsh words, the harshest possible for Peter, because what Peter takes as simple human wisdom is the old Adam’s temptation, Satan’s temptation, going all the way back to the garden: You shall be wise. You shall know good and evil. You will live forever. Get hold of good information, and good information will free you from all temptation, deliver you from all the struggles, and you’ll be on your way up and away,

out over the top of the creation. You will live forever. Those are human things. That is what we want, and what lies at the bottom of the human project: to gain power over life, to domesticate it, to control it, and above all to free ourselves from the limitations of creaturely life so that we can continue uninterrupted.

“For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” You are looking at things in a human way, and you don’t see the divine glory in this: that God looks into the bottom of things, with all its misery, need, and squalor. That’s the divine way. The human way is to climb ever upward and onward, upward and outward, over and above, beyond and through, so that we break out of the limitations and get over it. The divine way is the way set out in Philippians 2:5–11: he “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself,” poured himself out, gave himself away.

Take Up the Cross

And so Jesus is now going to give a lesson in this to all of us. “He called the crowd with his disciples.” Who is the crowd? It includes all of us who are listening. “And said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

What is it to take up the cross? I remember years ago listening to a very gifted young woman preach on this text. I just loved her; she was great. But she missed this. She wanted to use the words “take up” in a voluntary sort of way, and so she said in her sermon, “The ordinary crosses you get every day don’t count. The crosses that count are the crosses you take up.” So you literally have to take up the cross to follow him. In fact, I followed her later into a situation where her cross overpowered her, and in the midst of it she said, “I was wrong, wasn’t I?” It’s not the crosses you go looking for; the cross itself is bad enough. That’s one of the old rules: if you go looking for the cross, you’ll find it.

The crosses you take up are the crosses that happen in the day. They are crosses delivered to you, shaped to you, fitted to you. They are crosses that grow out of your everyday life and relationships. They are crosses that happen to you in families, at the hands of a mother or a father, a brother or a sister. They are the crosses of a husband or a wife, a child, a cousin, an uncle or an aunt. They are crosses fitted to you at your work. They are crosses fitted to you above all in the congregation, by the shape of religious life, where the God-sickness, as Karl Barth called it, breaks out. If you want to get in trouble, go to church. If you want to die, go to

an annual meeting. That's the way it goes. It's not that you seek it. It's that it happens that way.

So you are driven into the depths. You are brought down, deeper and deeper, to the entrance of hell itself, where the hinges are well oiled and the entrance is well paved, and where you have no alternative whatsoever. There is only one way out of this, and it is through the cross. And so to take up the cross is to turn and face what is coming your way and to receive it out of God's hand. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." We go down with Christ Jesus, down into the depths of everyday life, and just there deliverance comes, and hope arises, and there is a new beginning, and everything turns.

"For those who want to save their life will lose it." Boy, is that descriptive. This is the shape of human life. The harder we work on ourselves, the more difficult it becomes, and so we literally destroy ourselves with our efforts to procure a future beyond limitation. "And those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." There we go. Going down with him, we lose our grip, and losing our grip, we fall with him. And falling with him, we discover that he is picking us up and carrying us, not because we have made so much effort, but because it is in the nature of his bare, naked goodness to reach out and save, even as we are falling with and beside him. It's just beautiful.

"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."

Well, it's a threat, no question about it. But he is not ashamed of you, that's for darn sure. He is not ashamed of you, because he has his name written all over you, and because he himself is shaping you to his promise. He is not going to give you a charge and let you go and say, "All right, live up to it." He has the hammer out. He is hindering and defeating, bringing you to your limits, so that at those very limits you will discover his hands under you, his word lifting and carrying and blessing and sustaining.

So we have one of the fundamental texts and one of the fundamental promises, and that promise reaches deep, into the midst of contention, into the midst of struggle, into the midst

of suffering, to create anew, bringing hope and new possibility where there appears to be none.

I hope you have been able to hear this. All the best to you. We will catch up with you next week. God's peace.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnjGE20KKQQ>

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