

“The Promise, The Challenge?”

Today’s Gospel reading brings us to the middle of Mark’s narrative. Mark’s Gospel is the shortest Gospel, just 16 chapters. It is sometimes called “a passion story with an introduction.” Today we move from the introduction to the Passion Story. This is a major turning point in Jesus’ ministry.

Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples are in the Roman controlled, pagan city of Caesarea Philippi, located 35 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, as far away from Jerusalem as Jesus would ever travel. Many in the region of Galilee had encountered Jesus; heard his teaching, seen his healings; experienced his miracles.

Mark records 3 significant events in this story: 1. The Promise of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah; 2. The challenge of Jesus’ passion; 3. The call to discipleship. When Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the one long expected, he is the first to know Jesus’ true identity. Prior to this, only the evil spirits, the demons had recognized Jesus as the Son of God.

Yet this long-awaited promised Messiah will face rejection, death and resurrection. Peter and the others are not expecting a “suffering servant.” They are not prepared for this challenging prediction. Peter rebukes Jesus and Jesus replies, “Get behind me Satan... you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things...”

Finally, we hear the call to discipleship, the cost of discipleship. Take up your cross; follow Jesus to the cross; those who lose their life for Jesus, will save it. I have come to understand these words as “haunting” for me, and for others. They pervade my sense of what it means to know and to follow Jesus. They are unforgettable.

Mark wrote this Gospel 30-40 years after Jesus’ passion and glory. The Church had grown and spread through the Roman Empire. Mark was actually in Rome, writing to Christians who lived with the promise of Jesus, the promise of love, the promise of community. Yet they also lived with the challenge of suffering and death, the challenge of a hostile, persecuting world. Every day was a turning point for Mark’s community in the 1st century. Every day they knew the promise, the challenge, the cost of discipleship.

So we come to our own turning points in life. For us at Grace, the start of a new program year; the start of a new school year; an opportunity to begin new ministries, new relationships. Yesterday, I officiated at a funeral; next Saturday, I will officiate at a wedding; major turning points in life; times when we know the promise of faith and the challenge of discipleship.

To know and to follow Jesus is to know the reality of both His promise and His challenge. Each one of us must answer throughout our lives Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am?” Our answer defines our relationship with Jesus. If he is our Lord and Savior, then we will know the promise and the challenge.

Isaiah 50:4-9a
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38