

“Must”

Mark 8: 31-38

Let us pray:

*God of dispossession,
you rebuke our refusal
to give up our idols,
separate and safe;
send us with Jesus
on the way of the cross,
that we might lose our love of death
and take the risk of life,
through Jesus Christ, the new covenant. Amen.*

Some sermons seek to take listeners on what might be called a guided tour of a Bible story. The preacher tenderly, lovingly, places the whole episode or event or passage in the midst of the congregation and together they explore it from many angles and in the varying light of different perspectives. Such sermons, when done well, gift us with a new appreciation for that episode or event or passage; they lead to a deeper understanding of its place and meaning in the story of God’s people and inspire a greater willingness to obey that Scripture’s teaching for our own lives.

Other sermons operate with a narrower focus, lifting out a particular verse or image or theme from the passage to serve as the vehicle for a more directed, intense look at one aspect of the larger story.

But I have gone further even than that this week and concentrated on a single word in a single verse of this text from Mark’s gospel: the word *Must*. Mark writes that Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (v. 31)

Mark does not write that Jesus told his followers that he could do any of this, should do it, might be expected to do it, was considering the option, had taken under advisement the possibility of suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Mark writes that Jesus says “must”.

Here we come to the crux of the gospel story. We arrive at the crossroad of Jesus’ ministry. Up to now, Jesus has been healing, teaching, feeding, calling disciples, attracting followers. He has drawn attention and acclaim through miraculous deeds of curing intractable disease; exorcising fearsome demonic spirits; multiplying a few loaves and fish into a feast for thousands; demonstrating command over the elements of the natural world. The people are impressed, happy to be in his company, eager to see what marvel might come next.

When we look at where today’s verses come in Mark’s Gospel, we see that Jesus has just asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” He then sharpens that question to “Who do *you* say I am?”

and Peter responds, “You are the Messiah”. At precisely this point -- just when we think Mark’s narrative will continue ascending toward a recital of impending messianic glory, Jesus begins to speak not of glory and triumph, but of suffering and death.

The tenor of his teaching changes dramatically. Mark writes: *He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected and be killed, and after three days rise again.* This is his first lesson about such things, and it is a hard lesson for the disciples to hear, because it is so greatly at odds with what they have seen so far. It is certainly at odds with their long-held expectations of the long-awaited Messiah.

What can Jesus possibly mean by saying that the Son of Man *must* endure such a fate?

When I said a minute ago that this sermon is about a single word, you might have thought it odd and unpromising to focus on a single word in a Bible passage that is simply packed with important ideas and weighty images. And yet -- the narrow focus on this word “must” draws us into the most fundamental questions of Christianity -- *Why did Jesus die on the cross? What transforms his execution by the state apparatus at the behest of the religious hierarchy from the very worst sort of defeat into transcendent, eternal triumph? What does his death mean for the world?*

When Mark writes that Jesus “must” suffer, be rejected and killed before rising again, the word “must” compels us to ponder the nature of divine power and the limits of human power; it teaches us about the ferocity *and* the ultimate futility of human sin; it leads us into the spacious, gracious realm of God’s infinite love.

The authors of the *Sacra Pagina* commentary on the Gospel of Mark note that the impersonal verb “dei” [translated as “it is necessary” or “must”], is used here in these verses in Chapter 8 for the first time in this gospel. This verb, which carries an overtone of apocalyptic determinism, will become increasingly prominent as the gospel proceeds, and whenever it is used, it injects the idea of divine agency into the events being described. So -- we can see how Christian theology came to the idea that God wanted or intended for Jesus to die. But *why* would God want or intend for Jesus to die; and especially why would God want or intend for that death to involve suffering, rejection, humiliation?

Jesus himself does not explain to his followers why he must undergo this sequence of events. As a result, Christians through the centuries have wrestled with these questions, and have answered them with a broad range of possible explanations for why Jesus “must” undergo the suffering, humiliation, and death of crucifixion. There is one answer which has dominated Christian theology -- particularly European and American, or Western first world, Christian theology -- for centuries and it is a terrible answer which has deeply distorted our understanding of God and has deeply damaged our human relationships. That answer is the theology of substitutionary atonement, which asserts that God required Jesus to die as payment for human sin; the crucifixion was some sort of grotesque compensation for the insult our sin has imposed on God’s honor.

The theology of substitutionary atonement says that human sin offends God and arouses God's wrath, which must be appeased by an appropriate sacrifice. However, humans are unable to offer that appropriate sacrifice because the very sin for which we need forgiveness disqualifies us from attaining that forgiveness from a holy God. Therefore, only the death of God's beloved Son Jesus -- the One who is fully human but without sin -- can successfully propitiate God and open the path to reconciliation between humanity and God.

We find this idea expressed in a stanza of the hymn "How Great Thou Art": *And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, / sent him to die, I scarce can take it in, / that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, / he bled and died to take away my sin.*

This claim that God sent Jesus expressly to die so that God could forgive our sin offers us two deeply unsatisfactory ways to understand God:

One -- God is a monster who, for reasons beyond our human understanding, requires that Jesus suffer a painful and shameful death as payment for the dishonor our sin has brought upon God and as the condition for offering grace.

Two -- God is held captive by human sin until the shed blood of Jesus breaks sin's power over God, thereby freeing God to forgive us.

Friends, I do not deny the reality or the gravity of human sin. I do not minimize our need for repentance. I do not refute our utter reliance upon God's grace. I do not take for granted the freely-given gift of that grace.

I do dispute and reject a theology that suggests God's grace was stored in a locked box that could be opened only by the suffering and death of God's beloved Son.

I do dispute and reject and renounce and abhor a theology that makes human sin the most powerful force in the universe. If God cannot forgive our sin until that sin has been "paid for", then sin is more powerful than God because look what it made God do. The theology of substitutionary atonement claims that God wants to be reconciled with us, wants to offer us mercy and grace, but cannot do so without the sacrifice of Jesus to death on a cross.

Reformed theology affirms God's absolute sovereignty over all of creation. There is no creature or force or spirit or power in any place or time or form that can control or compel God. God can -- and does -- forgive human sin because God chooses to do so out of the freely-given love which characterizes all of God's acts. Shirley Guthrie writes in *Christian Doctrine*:

The Bible does not teach that *if* certain conditions are fulfilled with, by, or for us, *then* God will forgive and save us. ... What the Bible does teach [as Paul writes in Romans] is that "God proves his love for us in that *while we were still sinners* Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) ... Jesus died not so that the God who did not love us could begin to love us, but because God already loved us....

To be redeemed is not to be saved from an angry God seeking revenge. It is to be saved or redeemed from the sin that separates us from the God who loves us and wills only our good even when we live in self-destructive, sinful alienation from God. (p. 258) End quote

So, why “must” Jesus suffer and be rejected and die?

Because the world does need redemption. *We* do need redemption. The message of the cross is not that God requires suffering in order to transform this world from a place of sin to a place of love. The message of the cross is that God sees the suffering and need and fear and despair and cruelty and darkness that bedevil this world and God will go into even and always into the darkest, cruelest, most fearful places with the transformative power of vulnerable, yet indomitable love.

Jesus must die because God will not allow the world to remain subject to power structures which reward coercion and cruelty. God will not tolerate entrenched practices and attitudes and policies which prize force and despise vulnerability. God will not ignore or abandon a shared human experience which is controlled by fear and resistant to the peace which arises from justice. God will act -- God does act -- to transform the world from a place of weary woe to the redeemed, restored, holy kingdom promised to us by God’s Word and assured by God’s steadfast lovingkindness.

God steps into the world in the most shocking way -- by living among us as one of us; by dying on an instrument of torture and shame; by rising from death to new, eternal life. God rescues the world from darkness and sin in the most shocking way -- by countering force with vulnerable love; by uttering changing the terms by which power is defined; by pouring out God’s own self to reconcile all that has been ruptured or estranged; by bringing life out of death.

As Jesus continues to journey toward the cross in the Gospel texts we read during the coming Sundays of Lent, we will continue to look at that cross and to ponder what it means for us as Christians. We will look at other theological explanations of atonement; we will ponder the crucifixion’s message of sacrificial, self-giving love; we will explore the concept of glory. I’ll even come back to the hymn “How Great Thou Art” and say nice things about it. Certainly, we will not exhaust what there is to say about the cross, about redemption, about the God who loves us enough to come among us to live as one of us; the God who loves us enough to bear the cost of healing the rupture between humanity and holiness; the God who brings life out of death. It is the task of a lifetime and beyond to ponder the message of love and grace which we find in the story of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is a task those of us who seek to follow him “must” undertake. But what a wonderful, blessed task it is!

Amen.