



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Knoxville, TN

Feb. 25, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Sermon: “**Hope** in the Wilderness”

Mark 8:31-38 (NRSV)

8:31 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.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 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."

8:34 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.

8:35 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.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 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."

“Hope in the Wilderness”

Most of the time, you have to act before you know the whole story:

You go to work,
 you love your family,
 you support those around you,
 you show kindness to a stranger.

You don't know how it will affect this world, or if you'll have any affect at all. We do our best not knowing the rest of the story. The whole story.

On Thursday, the men of the church met for breakfast and a presentation by WPC member Hap McSween on the great breakthroughs in science last year. 30 men were present.

By the way, I gave a presentation to this same group a month ago.

Only 18 were present.

But who's counting?

We talked Thursday about why religion and science are moving away from each other in our time:

The anti-vaccine movement,

The denial of climate change,

We didn't discuss this, but you could add to that list:

The halt to invitro fertilization treatments in the name of a wrathful God.¹ *What are we thinking?*

As we were lamenting this separation, I was thinking, 'Isn't it odd, that science and religion diverge? Because at their root, they share a similar practice':

They both seek truth, from partial knowledge.

We act in the most faithful way we can, without knowing the whole story.

An example: Hap told us about the discovery last year of hydrogen deposits deep in the earth.² Scientists are unsure where the hydrogen is coming from or how extensive the deposits are. In the 2012, in Mawi, engineers hooked up a generator to a hydrogen reserve found deep in the ground. That generator produced electricity to a local town for a decade, and afterward, they realized there was almost just as much hydrogen down there as when they started 10 years ago. So, there could be a lot more hydrogen in the earth than we once suspected. In fact, if contemporary estimates are correct, scientists now believe there may be enough

¹ Roni Caryn Rabin and Azeen Ghorayshi, "Alabama Rules Frozen Embryos Are Children, Raising Questions About Fertility Care." *New York Times*. February 20, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/20/health/ivf-alabama-abortion.html>

² See Eric Hand, "Hunt for Natural Hydrogen Heats Up." *Science Magazine*. December 14, 2023. <https://www.science.org/content/article/breakthrough-of-the-year-2023>

hydrogen fuel to give us clean energy for thousands of years. When you burn hydrogen, the only waste left over is water.

But there's a lot of maybe's to that. A lot of uncertainties, there.
Partial knowledge.

We act in the most faithful way we can, without knowing the whole story.

'Knowing only in part' – could be the title of this section of the Gospel of Mark. The passage we just read, where Jesus tells Peter to 'get behind me Satan,' is the third act of a three-part story.

Act 1: beginning in v. 22

Jesus meets a blind man along the road, and, he lays hands on him. Jesus gives him vision, but, at first, only partially. Jesus asks, 'Can you see?' And the man answers, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Jesus tries again and restores his sight fully.

Act 2: beginning in v. 27

Jesus asks the disciples, 'Who do the crowds say I am?'

They answer,

'Some say John the Baptist. Others Elijah.'

'Well, who do you say I am?'

Peter speaks for the disciples, 'You are the Messiah.'

Act 3: beginning with our verse 31

Jesus '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...And Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him.' And Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!"

In the second act, Peter gets it right,
and then in the third, Peter gets it, so wrong.

He's like that man, on the road, who could see, but only in part. "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking."

The problem is that Peter fails to recognize he doesn't know the whole story. Instead, he fills the gaps with the conventional wisdom of his day: That the Messiah must be a new king, and victory comes by defeating one's enemies. That wisdom said that no Messiah, worth his salt, would be rejected and killed.

In taking Jesus aside, Peter takes the lead.

And in response, Jesus has to remind Peter: "Look, you don't know the whole story. You don't know what's going to happen here. Get behind me. Follow me. Stop trying to get out ahead of me."

We don't know the whole story: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly," Paul reminds the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:12).

Or, in Jesus's own words, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Follow Jesus.

But that's our problem. That's my problem. We don't follow. When we don't know the whole story, we fill in the gaps. We rush to easy answers, easy judgments.

'There's a problem?' So, we look for someone to blame, just look at our politics. We do it in the church, too. Surrounded by the mysteries of faith, too great for us to fathom, instead of following that mystery, we instead draw lines, about who is in, and who is out.

That's been the history even with this passage. The church hears Jesus say, "deny yourself and follow me"; and instead of leaning into that mystery, or taking a hard look at our own discipleship. Instead, the church has heard those words and used them to enforce the status quo.

'Know your place. Deny yourself.'

How many times have churches preached that?

During the season of Lent, our church is doing a study of Columbia Theological Seminary Professor William Yoo's book, *What Kind of Christianity: Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church*.³

³ Quotes and story from William Yoo, *What Kind of Christianity: Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 11-18.

Throughout our class on Tuesday, we wrestled with just how many white Christians either held slaves or were complicit in the practice of slavery in their time. Estimate figures of the time suggested that “one-third of the ministers, and one-half of the members of the [Presbyterian] Church’ in the southern states owned enslaved persons.” We wrestled with the fact that the Church went along with the wisdom of the day, and we asked ourselves, what would we have done?

In his first chapter, Dr. Yoo tells the story of Angela Emily Grimke, a Presbyterian living in Charleston, SC in the early 1800s. As a young woman, she witnessed slavery’s brutality one day by seeing the bruised body of an enslaved child, who limped and grimaced from the wounds he suffered at a slave-owner’s hands, as he opened windows in her school.

A member of a prominent Presbyterian family in Charleston, Angela Emily Grimke was horrified at what she saw and so she took her complaint to her church’s pastor. This white pastor said he agreed with her abhorrence at the brutality of slavery, but counseled “the most faithful response was to ‘pray and wait.’” Unsatisfied with that answer, Grimke next took her complaint to the church’s Session, not realizing at the time that the entire church Session was made up of slave-masters themselves. They told her that she would one day grow out of her worries and see the wisdom of slavery.

In other words, they told her, “know your place; deny yourself.”

Angela Emily Grimke would go on to leave the Presbyterian church altogether. The pastor and Session tried to get her to stay, likely because she came from an affluent Charleston family, but, as professor Yoo puts it, she “simply refused to remain in a proslavery church.” She is now “in the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum, in part because she protested as a young woman against a white Presbyterian pastor’s counsel to ‘pray and wait’ for a solution to slavery.” To that she instead said, “No, we must pray and work.”

And there it is: taking up the cross, and following Jesus. You see, self-denial isn’t self-abasement. It doesn’t mean putting up with abuse. It’s not suffering for suffering sake. The oppression of a community, the abuse

suffered at the hands of abusers, the tyranny of corrupt leaders and unjust systems, near and far, they are not the crosses Jesus calls us to bear.

In fact, when Jesus calls us to follow him, he means follow him in his ways of radical love. This is the love that stood up to an empire; that ate with tax collectors and sinners; that healed the sick; welcomed the little children; challenged the rich; challenged the religious leaders of his day.

In every episode of this short Gospel of Mark, Jesus challenges the conventional wisdom of his day. That's why his disciples seem so inept. Poor Peter, gets one thing right. He calls Jesus the Messiah and the next paragraph, it's "Get behind me Satan."

He thought he knew what a Messiah was.
He could barely keep up. We can barely keep up.

But we don't have to get ahead of him – we don't have to know the whole story. The Gospel only asks us to follow, to follow faithfully.

Following Jesus is done, not always by grand gestures of self-renunciation. Its more in the day-to-day acts of love shown to others.

It's the Justice Knox participants, who a couple weeks ago, had already been at church for two hours but stayed for a third, or even a fourth, to learn more about where they can show up to make this city a more just and livable place, especially for those most on its margins.

It's the care team members who visit our members who are shut in. They might not even have known or have met them before, but they want to check and see how they are doing, and ensure that they know, that they are loved and remembered and still a vital part of Westminster Presbyterian Church, even when they cannot be here physically.

It's the teenager who talks to the new kid at school, or the left-out kid, or the just-having-a-bad-day kid, because they look like they could use a friend right now.

It's the supportive text one co-worker gives to another after she had a rough shift.

It's the afternoons volunteers will give this summer in voter registration drives.

It's the time you put in this morning, coming here, not sure what you'll get out of it. It's not even coming to *get* anything out of it, but going to church because you love and you support this community, and the people sitting around you.

None of us have the whole story. You can't know the effect of simple and faithful actions done for those around you. You're not supposed to.

Angela Emily Grimke had no idea that she would go down in history as a leader of the abolitionist movement when she walked away from that Presbyterian Church. In fact, I bet, that day didn't feel like a triumph. I bet it felt more like a gut punch when she walked away.

But she wasn't just walking away from something.
She was talking towards someone.
She was following someone.

On that hard day, I hope she heard those supportive words from Jesus, who said to Peter: "Look, you don't know the whole story. You don't know what's going to happen here."

Or maybe she was just chewing on those timeless words he told the crowds: "Take up your cross and follow me."

All these years later, that is what we still do:

We take up the cross.
We follow his path of love.

Never knowing the outcome,
we trust that it leads to life,
to life-everlasting. Amen.