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Scripture: Mark 8:22—9:1

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We are getting going on this series from Mark:

The Way of Discipleship...

Looking at what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Last week we looked at the Transfiguration...

It was God's way of getting our attention...

His way of saying "Listen to Him."

As Christ's disciples we first listen to him...

We listen to the one who gave up his life for us...

He is safe to follow...because he loves us.

This is the foundation.

This week we're stepping back a chapter...

Listening to some pretty tough words from Jesus to his disciples.

The way that Mark lays out these chapters is first to give a prediction of his death...

And then to provide teaching to his disciples...

So this morning we're looking at his first passion prediction and the teaching that follows.

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Mark 8...

We'll be looking at verse 22 through chapter 9:1.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

²² They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

²⁴ He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

²⁵ Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

²⁸ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

It’s estimated that the average adult makes 35,000 somewhat conscious decisions per day.

Now I don’t know how they figured that out...

But it’s on the internet so it must be true.

It seems a little high to me...

But think about it...

It’s 10:30 and what decisions have you made already?

What to wear?

The blue or gray shirt?

The brown or black socks?

The black or gray shoes?

What will the kids wear?

What to eat?

Should I read while I eat?

Should I go to church?

What should I say to my spouse?

Should I shower...

What shampoo or soap to use?

Should I brush my teeth?

What way should I take to get to church?

Should I talk to people before finding a seat?

The list could go on and on...

It may not be 35,000 decisions, but it's definitely a lot.

In our passage this morning, we hear Jesus talking about that one decision that affects them all:

The decision to follow him.

The decision to live as his disciple.

“If you want to be my disciple you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.”

From our passage we get the sense that the disciples don't quite know what this decision means.

Look at the sequence of events:

First, Peter makes the all-important confession that Jesus is the Christ.

He is the long awaited Messiah...

Who has come to make all things new.

This is a big deal...

To follow this man is a big deal.

Then Jesus gives the first prediction of his suffering and death.

He says, “I'm going to suffer, be rejected, and be killed.”

This doesn't sit well with Peter...

So he pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him...

Probably telling him not to talk like this...

Because this wasn't his destiny...

Peter had seen the miracles and knew that suffering and death were not in the Messiah's future.

Being a follower of the Messiah, Peter *expected* glory...

Glory for the Messiah, and most likely glory for his followers.

So if the road that the Messiah walked was leading to suffering and death...

Then where was the road leading that the disciples were walking?

And where is the road headed that we're walking?

Are we able to clearly see what it means to be a follower of Christ?

Now, we're pretty smart people...

I think most of us can sniff out the deceit of the prosperity gospel...

The teaching that says that God wants nothing more than to bless us with health and wealth...

"If you follow Jesus, then good things will come your way..."

"God wants you to be happy."

We don't buy into this blatant of a distorted Gospel...

But maybe it *has* seeped into our thinking...

Into our lives as followers of Christ.

We think that as disciples we're entitled to success in our business dealings...

We think we're entitled to raising healthy, successful children...

That we're guaranteed a secure financial future.

And don't hear me as dropping the hammer just on you...

Because I've bought into it too...

There's nothing more appealing than a comfortable life, free of pain and trials.

And living in the Western world...this is what we're told to expect.

This is what we're told to strive for.

But is this the road that Jesus leads us down?

Is this where Jesus is walking?

After Jesus rebukes Peter, he schools the people in what it means to be a disciple:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.³⁶”

This is a tough teaching for us to hear...

“Deny yourself...take up your cross and follow me.”

Do we know what this means?

To deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him?

Dallas Willard has written a lot about Christian spiritual formation and discipleship...

He says, “Being [Jesus’ disciple is] not a matter of special “religious” activities...”

It’s not about the individual things that we do...

“But,” he continues, “it’s an orientation and quality of my entire existence.”

Being a disciple is an orientation...

It’s an alignment of our whole being towards Christ.

This alignment, we hear Christ say, involves “denying our self.”

This does *not* mean that we deny our feelings...

We’re allowed to feel sad, or angry, and yes, even happy following Christ.

Denying our self does *not* mean that we deny our self-worth...

We are created in God’s image and therefore we are all of immense value.

Denying our self does *not* mean that we refuse ourselves certain things...

It may involve this (e.g. no smoking, no swearing, etc.)...

But this isn’t what Jesus is talking about.

“To deny yourself means to deny your self-lordship” (Darrell Johnson, “Demands My All”).

It means to resist, reject, and refuse...

To say “no” to the god who is me.

When Peter denies knowing Jesus later on in the Gospels...

He cuts himself off from Jesus:

“I don’t know the man.”

Well this is us saying, “I don’t know the god who is me.”

“I’ve given up serving myself.”

“I’ve given up living for my own interests.”

This is what it is to deny oneself.

Aligning our entire existence around Jesus also involves “taking up our cross...”

We’ve all heard this phrase.

It’s is commonly misunderstood.

We often think of it as bearing the weight of life’s unfortunate circumstances:

Chronic illnesses...

Accidents and disabilities...

Or challenging relationships...

“Well, this is the cross I must bear” we say.

This does not get at the depth of Jesus’ command though.

We have the freedom to choose if we pick up the cross that Jesus is talking about.

It is a decision that we make...

Jesus says, “*If* you want to be my follower...”

“*If* you want to be my disciple.”

There’s a choice involved.

Jesus is honest when he’s talking to the crowd...

He’s not trying to sugarcoat anything...

He’s not trying to win friends...

He wants the disciples to know what following him involves.

“Following me is not an easy decision,” he says.

“I want you to realize that walking down this road is walking to where I’m going.”

Telling his disciples to take up their cross probably would have shocked them...

They would have thought about criminals condemned to death...

Forced to carry the instrument of their execution...

On a death march of public shame.

This is the life that Jesus is inviting us into as his followers...

Where we decide to walk the road he walked.

Denying ourselves and choosing to pick up our cross.

This is the way of discipleship.

There's a man...

Janusz Korczak...who made several cross-bearing decisions.

He was alive during the time of Nazi occupation of Poland.

A well-known children's writer at the time and a former Polish soldier.

Janusz was the director of an orphanage for Jewish children.

In his orphanage there were nearly 200 children.

When the Nazis took over Poland...the orphanage was forced to move to the ghetto at Warsaw.

Even though he didn't have to, Korczak made the decision to go with the children.

On several occasions the underground resistance for Poland offered to get him out...

They offered him sanctuary on the Aryan side.

Again Korczak said that he did not want to abandon his children.

When the orphans were to be sent to a concentration camp...

Janusz still did not abandon his children.

He walked with his children to the train that took him to Treblinka...

It was his choice to go with them...

Giving them hope and showing them love through it all.

I don't know if this man knew Christ...

but it seems to me that he understood what Christ was talking about...

Making the decision of self-denial, and choosing to walk the road that led to death.

Taking up your cross may not lead to death...

But it *will* be painful...

It *will* be uncomfortable...

And it *will* be challenging.

It will probably mean giving up one of the things that we treasure most in this life...

Our time.

That piece of freedom that we desperately try holding onto.

All of this is overwhelming...

Denying ourselves, picking up our crosses, and following him...

Losing our lives for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the Gospel...

It's a tall order...

And if we try walking this road on our own we'll never make it.

We might make a few right decisions along the way...

But that one important decision will never be our life orientation.

We will never align our lives with Christ...

And our lives as disciples will remain lethargic and lazy. (Words that I'm preaching to myself)

In verse 29 of chapter 8 Peter makes his confession of who Jesus is...

"You are the Messiah;"

"You are the Christ;"

"You are the Anointed One."

And this means *everything* to us on our journey as his followers.

This confession sets us on course with Christ, the anointed one.

Lord's Day 12 from the catechism asks, "Why is he called Christ, meaning anointed?"

It answers, "Jesus has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be...our eternal king
who guards us
and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us."

Jesus *is* the Christ...

The one who lays down his life for His people;

The one who God chooses to reign over the entire world;
And the one who keeps us secure in him.

The Catechism continues to say that we “share in his anointing.”

We are anointed to confess his name...

To present ourselves to him as a living sacrifice of thanks...

We too are anointed with the Holy Spirit...

And the Spirit empowers us to follow this road to the cross.

On this journey we boldly proclaim the name of Christ...

In the power of the Spirit we refuse to know ourselves as gods...

We say, “I don’t know that person anymore!”

In the power of the Spirit we take up our crosses by offering ourselves in service to others...

By making the choice to die to our right to put ‘me’ first.

Making the decision to live out of gratitude.

And in the power of the Spirit we orient our entire lives around the Messiah...

God has called you to salvation in Christ...

It is his decision to love you...

And to open your heart up to the saving message of the Gospel.

And as his people...

We are being called to follow the Son.

We are being called to live as disciples...

Committed to where He’s walking.

This is not a one-time decision...

Not a one and done.

It is a daily choice to follow him.

It’s waking up in the morning with this prayer on our lips and our heart:

“I decide today to follow my Lord Jesus wherever he leads.”

And by His Spirit he strengthens us...

He's strengthens us to follow him as we walk where he walked...

For His glory...

For our sanctification...

And for the blessing of the whole world.

Amen.