



Pentecost 16
Proper 19 (B)

Ending

RCL: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

There are countless ways we expect the story – our stories – to end.

“And they lived happily ever after.”

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

“Well done, good and faithful servant.”

“And one day there will be an incredible and victorious military overthrow of ancient Jerusalem....”

Wait. What?

This might not be your favorite ending to the story, but it used to be a favorite ending a long time ago. There was this really popular story that got passed around through word of mouth and eventually through written word in the ancient Jewish world. This story sprouted from a people in exile, in hopes of a restored and united Israel; it sprouted from empire after empire controlling *their* land, *their* city, centuries of forced occupation, many failed rebellions, and a longing for peace. A longing to be at home. A longing for a place of worship. A longing for God’s kingdom to come in full.

And this grand story pivoted on the coming of a Messiah. Now, all the stories about this Messiah were not the same. Some Messiahs were angelic, some were human, some were born of God. Sometimes there was one Messiah and sometimes there were multiple Messiahs. But one oft-repeated theme among these many stories was that the Messiah would overthrow whatever empire was in power and deliver the Israelites from oppression. And this Messiah was sometimes painted as a military champion, someone who came with power and force. They were the hope of a downtrodden nation. You can see why this story would be so hopeful, so needed for a people who had lost so much of what seemed to have been promised to them by God. We are all looking for a way out of our messes.

So, when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter responds, “You are the Messiah,” might it be the case that Peter had heard some stories of who the Messiah was supposed to be as he grew up a Jew in a Jewish world? Might it be the case that he had a particular image and vision of this Messiah?

When Jesus continues the conversation, and he predicts his own personal overthrow, betrayal, suffering, and death, maybe we can understand why Peter rebukes him. Peter's exact response is not supplied in our text but it's as if he is saying to Jesus:

“No, no, no that is not how the story goes! You're getting it wrong. There is only supposed to be suffering for our enemies and there is only supposed to be an overthrow of the Roman occupation and you are supposed to single-handedly bring about the reign of God through the triumph of Israel! You are supposed to be a king who reigns. We need a triumphant Messiah!”

The stories just do not add up, Peter thinks. And if Jesus is the Messiah, which Peter obviously believes, then why is Jesus predicting this awful future of suffering and death?

If we could see inside Peter's mind, it might look like a demolition site: futures of a restored Jerusalem suddenly trampled into dust. Futures of the reign and power of God no longer made sense. Futures where Peter stood next to Jesus as his right-hand man, combatting the army of enemies... well, that seemed impossible now.

On one hand, Peter professes an enormous amount of faith in Jesus. And on the other hand, Peter's faith is still very much on his own terms, his own vision of reality, his own understanding of God's plan.

Sometimes, we must learn that faith is relinquishing our own terms, our own realities, our own idea of God's plans. Sometimes, the demolition and destruction are just the beginning of a more real, more honest discipleship.

And so, the question that Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” is a question that soars across two thousand years and lands in this room. It is a question posed to you and to this community.

You see, who we believe Jesus to be and how we enact our discipleship are so tightly connected. There's a reason Mark narrates this scene about Jesus' identity and then quickly reminds us that to be a disciple is to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

It matters what kind of Messiah we have faith in.

If we think Jesus is a Messiah who will overthrow all our enemies and topple the empires of this world with the force of a military commander, might we be enticed into a violent and self-serving discipleship?

If we think Jesus is a Messiah who is distant and untouchable, might we become disciples who build walls around us to distance ourselves from “the other” and secure our own tribe?

If we think Jesus is a Messiah who won't touch the dredges of death and the hardships of this life, might we also be disciples tempted into every form of escapism possible? Resisting dying to self and death itself at all possible costs?

But if we behold Jesus for who he is, a Messiah who suffered, was rejected, killed, and then rose again – well, then, what in the world might our own discipleship look like? If our own lives are to be molded after his life, if we are really united to him through our baptism, how might our days unfold?

The stories we tell of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, might just be the stories we live out. This Christian life – this cross-shaped life – is not an easy road. It is a serious story. It is the truest and most powerful story.

And so dear Christians, are we a people who resemble a crucified and suffering Messiah? Does our collective body resemble his? Are we afraid of our wounds? Have we learned to bear the beautiful yet costly marks of resurrection? Do we look like Jesus?

We should not be surprised if and when we suffer. We should not be shocked that we will have to lose our lives to find them. We should not be bowled over by the fact that we will have to relinquish our control of God and let God hold us in his wounded hands. Instead, we should be ready to take up our cross and follow Jesus: every day, in all circumstances, through the valley of the shadow of death, as our bodies age and our cells mutate, as we go about the mundane struggle of daily business and work, as we grieve, when we rejoice, through losses and gains, through seasons of blessings and seasons of wanting, as we learn to give and as we learn to receive, as we are burdened and as we help others carry burdens.

For in every cross-shaped experience of our lives there is a promise. It is not a promise we can always feel or sense or appreciate at first glance. But the promise is still there. And it is a promise that your ending, our ending, the world's ending is a beautiful one. All of our endings find meaning in that early morning on Easter. When that cross lost its sting and became a sign to us that God had triumphed over the greatest enemies: sin and death. The cross becomes a promise of the best kind of ending. An ending where God has come near and saved us and loved us and delivered us and proclaimed to every particle of creation, as Julian of Norwich phrased it: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

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