

When Jesus Calls You “Satan”

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Mark 8:31-36 — Then Jesus 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." 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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

We have a fight in this morning's passage, a heated argument between two of the Gospel's main characters. At this point in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 8, Peter has been a friend and follower of Jesus for a good while. Along with the other twelve Apostles, he's been at Jesus's side in the synagogues and on the countryside, teaching, healing, traveling from town to town together, being worshiped by some crowds and booed by others. Peter and Jesus are bonded. They are brothers. But like brothers, like any two siblings, they can butt heads.

Honestly, I feel a good deal of sympathy for Peter here. He's doing what seems right to him, and really, what he's doing makes a whole lot of sense. Just before this morning's passage, Jesus and his disciples are walking together, traveling on to the next village, as they often do, and on the way, Jesus asks them, out of the blue, "Who do people say that I am?" In other words, "What are people saying about me?" The disciples eagerly chime in. As the closest followers of this new and controversial rabbi, they are a hot topic these days—and, understandably, they're enjoying it. We all like to get at least a minute in the spotlight, right? With amusement, and maybe a bit of smugness, the disciples begin telling the stories they've overheard, relishing the rumors that have spread about their crew: "Some people, Jesus, they're saying that you're actually John the Baptist, come back to life!" (John the Baptist was that famous, eccentric evangelist who got imprisoned, and had just been executed, for saying that the king was immoral.) Another disciple joins in the fun: "I heard someone say that you're actually *Elijah* come back to life!" Everyone chuckles: that dude's been dead for hundreds of years.

"But who do *you* say that I am?" Jesus asks. Everyone stops laughing. The silence becomes heavy. Now is the time to speak out-loud what all of the disciples have been thinking in silence for months. Now is the time to name something that is dangerous, and even deadly, but necessary to name. No one has the courage to do it—except Peter. "You are the Messiah," he says. "You are the one our Scriptures foretold hundreds of years ago. You are the one who God has appointed to liberate us, the Jewish people, from Roman rule. You are the one who will make us a great nation again."

For hundreds of years, the Jewish people have been forced to bow to a foreign authority. For over 50 years, it's been the Roman Empire; for hundreds of years before then, it was the Greek Empire. It's been a thousand years since the legendary King David ruled, back when Israel was a glorious, mighty nation. And although the magnificent temple, built during the reign of David's son Solomon, is still standing, there's a Roman fortress looming inside the walls now. Roman soldiers are everywhere, and everyone knows that, at the end of the day, *they're* the ones in charge. These are not the glory days, folks. But the Messiah is going to change all of that. He will inspire our people to take a stand. Maybe he'll be a general, maybe he'll be a politician, we don't know, but whatever he is, he will lead our nation towards freedom, towards greatness.

"You are the Messiah," Peter says. And Jesus responds: "*Shhh.*" "Don't talk about it." He doesn't say *why* the disciples shouldn't talk about it, but they can make an educated guess: if Rome gets wind of this, if they learn that this religious teacher and rumored miracle worker, who the masses are beginning to rally around, if they learn that he thinks he's some sort of liberator (and, more importantly, if *the masses* start to think he's their liberator), then Jesus will get crucified in no time. Because the one thing that power cannot tolerate is a challenge. A mere whiff of dissent, and these chuckling disciples will be snuffed out.

And that brings us to this morning's passage, to the fight. Right after saying "*Shhh,*" Jesus 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." This term Jesus uses, "Son of Man," is similar in meaning to the term "Messiah." It comes from the Hebrew book of Daniel, and it refers to someone who will be sent by God to rule the earth. But there's more to the term "Son of Man" than that. See, in Jesus's day, men were traditionally referred to as the son of their father. So, if I was alive then and there, people might address me formally as "William, son of Steve." This tradition has continued in Middle Eastern cultures throughout history and to this very day. The Arabic word *bin* means "son," and whenever you hear the proper name of an Arab man spoken, you'll hear the word *bin* in there. For instance, the name of Jordan's current king is Abdullah, and his proper name is Abdullah II bin Hussein—that is, Abdullah, the son of Hussein, Jordan's previous king. Osama bin Laden was Osama, the son of Laden. Now, rewind to Jesus, who chooses, in this morning's passage, to identify himself as the son of—not Mary, not Joseph, not God, but Man. And the Greek word in the New Testament isn't focused on gender here: Jesus isn't saying that he's the son of maleness; he's saying that he's the son of *humankind*, the child of humanity. So, even as he uses a thoroughly Jewish term from the Book of Daniel "Son of Man," he is describing himself as one whose life mission matters not just for Jews, but for all people: the Child of Humanity.

But the fight between Peter and Jesus isn't about this term. No, it's about what Jesus says must happen to him. He must suffer. He must be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the scribes. He must be killed, even. I wonder if Peter was so confused and disturbed by what Jesus was saying that he didn't even hear the next part—about Jesus rising again three days later. Immediately, Peter pulls Jesus aside, and that's when things get heated. Essentially, Peter says,

“Shut up! If you’re the Messiah, why are you talking like this? You don’t need to *suffer*, you need to succeed! You need to rally more followers, strengthen our ranks, so that we can become a force for Rome to reckon with! And you can’t be *rejected* by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes—those are the powerful Jews, those are *our* people, and if you’re going to help us become a great nation again, to become *God’s* nation, then we’ll need those powerful people on our side!”

And here’s the thing, friends: what Peter is saying makes sense—at least, it makes human sense. But Jesus is not following human sense. Jesus is following the Spirit of God—and apparently, the Spirit of God gets angry sometimes: “Get behind me, Satan! For I am not the Son of Man you think I am. I am not here to fulfill your nationalist hopes. I am not here to make you more popular or to make your life more convenient. I am not here to help you or your nation become great in the eyes of the world.” No, Jesus is not that kind of Son of Man. Instead, Jesus is the Child of Humanity, whose eyes are not on more power, but on more love; who looks with compassion on those who are suffering and then chooses to suffer, even to die alongside them; who takes the side of the poor over the rich, the side of the stigmatized over the respectable, and the side of the downtrodden over the mighty. Jesus is the Child of Humanity, following the Spirit of God, and inviting us to follow, too.

Each of us, friends, is at risk of being like Peter: of having good intentions, of making a lot of sense, but of still not following in the way of Jesus—and even of following, unwittingly, in the way of Satan. Each of us would do well to remember this possibility and to practice humility. But remember also that the invitation is always there. The Spirit of God is always beckoning us to choose love over power. The Child of Humanity is always calling us to follow. It is not easy, or popular, or “great,” but it is good and beautiful and, for the sake of our world today, necessary. Amen.