

## Journey of Preparation

Passion Sunday meditation

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Mark 10:32-39

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They're on the road again. As a matter of fact, you may even conclude that Willie Nelson's familiar song could well be their theme song. Jesus' own self description admits that he has "nowhere to lay his head." An itinerant preacher/teacher, he instructs his disciples and reaches out to the crowds as he moves from one place to another. The first three Gospels put this constant movement front-and-center, particularly when he makes his turn toward Jerusalem. In each of the three Gospels, called the "*Synoptic Gospels*" because they so closely follow Mark's order and tend to see things together, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ and Jesus immediately begins to instruct the disciples that he must die. They go to the Mount of Transfiguration; and then, as Luke so plainly puts it, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Fully half of the book of Mark, a little less so the book of Matthew and almost two-thirds of the book of Luke are about the trip. That journey is critical to understanding Jesus. It is a basic component of his story. It is a journey in answer to one of the major questions posed to early Christians. "How could he be who you say he was and die such an ignoble death?" And so Mark and the two Gospels that follow set out to show that far from an accident, Jesus' death in Jerusalem is crucial to understanding who he was. It was a fate Jesus did not desire, but it was a fate toward which he steadily walked. As a matter of fact, the events surrounding Jesus' death were so critical that Martin Kahler and others go so far as to suggest that the best definition of a Gospel is "a passion narrative with an extended introduction".

Jesus and the disciples were, Mark says, "going up to Jerusalem" with Jesus walking ahead of the disciples, who were hanging back, confused, troubled by the course of events, and even more, "afraid." For the third time, Jesus tells them he is going to die. With the city looming on the horizon, he lays out for them a detailed itinerary of what is to come: trial, sentencing, mocking, spitting, flogging and death. No longer in the distant future, the crisis is upon them; and they respond with seemingly the best insight they can muster: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. We want you to grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left." James and John, members of the inner circle of disciples, had walked so closely with Jesus. You would think that more than anyone, they should have been prepared to be present to him in his pain. Yet, they seem utterly clueless. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Jesus asks them. "Oh yes!" they respond. "We are! We are!"

Maybe it is simply an act of kindness, but Jesus does not respond by scolding the disciples nor by pointing out to them as he will do later (14:26) that, indeed, they are not ready. In a matter of days they all will scatter and fail him miserably. The path ahead will pass through the Garden of Gethsemane, the courtyard of the high priest and Golgotha. Although, to their credit, one day they will drink the cup of suffering and die the deaths of martyrs, in the near future they will do everything in their power to flee the scene.

Three times Jesus instructs the disciples concerns his approaching death. Three times they degenerate into childish, competitive games. Three times Jesus speaks to them about the ongoing task to which he has called them—the task of taking up their crosses, the task of being servant rather than lord. Three times he seeks to tell them it is about giving their lives rather than selfishly clutching their lives to themselves. The walk to Jerusalem is drawing to a close, and yet here they are, competitively seeking to elbow their way to the top. You can almost hear the plaintiff question he will pose to them in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Could you not wait with me one hour? Could you not draw near to strengthen and comfort me and to draw strength and comfort from me and from one another for the perilous road that lies ahead for us all?"

This Lenten season and in particular the week that lies ahead is just that. It is a journey of preparation, a journey for drawing closer to one another and to the Christ as he makes his way to the cross. If we are honest and it's good to be honest in church, we are not too far removed from those early disciples. We, too, would prefer an easier and brighter way. We know ourselves to be tempted by a more profitable gospel, a gospel that promises immediate success, immediate

gratification, immediate peace and the immediate relief of suffering and difficulty. With Poet Ann Weems, we struggle with the chaos that surrounds us and ask deep within our souls, "Is there no back road to Jerusalem? No quiet path where angels tend to weary travelers? No sanctuary from the noise of the world?" Can this hectic thoroughfare on which we find ourselves truly be the way God would have us go? [*Kneeling in Jerusalem*, p. 27].

Yes, there is another way. There is another highway. It is the highway of the so called prosperity gospel that promises to give us just what we want when we want it. It is the popular formulation of the message of Jesus that seeks, in the words of one church consultant, to "find out where people itch . . . and then find a way for the church to scratch that itch" because, the consultant assures us, "the church is here to meet people's felt needs."

There is another way, but it is not the way of the Jesus of the Gospels. If we would travel with that Jesus, the road ahead of us is the way of preparation. It is the way of costly discipleship. It is the way, in the words of Lamar Williamson, of Jesus who "came to serve and to give his life. Anyone who contemplates following Jesus without fear and trembling has not understood true discipleship" [*Interpretation: Mark*, 195].

And so we ask ourselves in this season of Lent and at the beginning of this holiest of weeks: which gospel will it be? Which Lord will we seek to serve? For still Jesus asks, "Could you not wait with me one hour?"