

Bruised Healer

Year B – 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

When you decided to follow Jesus, what did you think you were doing? If you were raised in an American church, you might have thought you were signing up for a life of divine protection, blessing, and success. Or what about Jesus - who did you think you were following? Did you think of Jesus as a kind of superhero, four-star general, or moral game changer?

Today I'd like to talk about the kind of Savior Jesus is, what this shows us of God, and what this means for those of us who have decided to follow Jesus. I will suggest that the kind of Savior we have in Jesus is one we never would have guessed and if we're honest, most days we'd rather not have. What our readings today display for us, each in their own way, is that Jesus saves us by getting bruised himself. In the words of Isaiah, "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (v.5). Our Savior is a Bruised Healer.

So what's a Bruised Healer? Readers of Mark's Gospel have long been aware of what has come to be called the Messianic Secret, or, the secret of Jesus's identity as messiah and savior. Time and again in Mark's Gospel, Jesus asks people, pleads with people, not to tell others what he has done for them. It's as strange to the people he healed and rescued as it is to us. Shouldn't Jesus be seeker sensitive? Shouldn't Jesus make it plain and explain? But Jesus only speaks in parables. And according to Mark, he does this *in order to* confuse and keep people from turning to him (4:12). The puzzle of Jesus as Messiah, the Anointed One, only starts to resolve when Jesus clarifies what kind of Savior he will be: one who suffers and dies.

Three times in Mark's Gospel, Jesus predicts his suffering and death. The first time is right after Peter names him as Messiah in chapter 8, and as fast as Jesus applauds Peter he rebukes him and calls him Satan because Peter was not on board with Jesus's prediction about suffering and dying. Jesus's second prediction of his suffering and death comes a chapter later, and it's immediately followed by Jesus scolding the disciples about their argument over "who was the greatest" (9:34). Jesus's third prediction of death comes a chapter after that and AGAIN, it's immediately followed by James and John asking to be the greatest – to sit at his right and left hands – which was our passage today.

The reason why Jesus keeps his identity secret is because no one could see the full picture of who he was, and even after hearing it three times, the disciples refused to embrace this kind of Savior. In some ways, Jesus's identity was no secret at all – Jesus made it clear to them repeatedly – the problem was the disciples could not, **would not**, embrace a Suffering Savior.

This semester, my students are learning to pray the psalms. Psalms, Eugene Peterson tells us, is the "sprawling university that Hebrews and Christians have attended to learn to answer God, to learn to pray" (50, *Working the Angles*). He goes on to make the case for going to the Psalms to learn how to pray by saying, "The Psalms were the prayer book of Israel; they were the prayer book of Jesus; and they are the prayer book of the church. At no time in the Hebrew and

Christian centuries (with the possible exception of [the last hundred years or so]) have the Psalms not been at the very center of all concern and practice in prayer” (50).

Now, I suspect James and John, the sons of Zebedee-the Sons of Thunder, prayed Psalm 91. Perhaps they had Psalm 91 in mind when they asked Jesus to sit at his right and left hand. But just because they prayed the Psalm doesn't mean they understood it. It's possible their understanding of Psalm 91 was the same as the devil's, who used Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus into tossing himself off the top of the temple because God could be treated like a genie to be tested.

We should cut the disciples some slack though because the idea of a suffering messiah was not on anyone's radar. It wasn't until later, after his death and resurrection, that Jesus's followers began to see what they had previously ignored, that Isaiah's suffering servant was not just about Israel but Jesus. This was a messiah who suffered rather than harmed, who died rather than killed. Jewish expectations of a messiah of military might, kingly conquests, or prophetic power all had to be reinterpreted, re-envisioned, re-imagined in the light of the cross. Jesus was a savior they never would have guessed, and never would have chosen.

And this is where we begin to see God. God is not who we would have guessed or chosen, because God is God and not our fanciful illusion of what we would have God be. This is why it's only after Jesus predicts his suffering and death, it's only after he describes greatness as being a servant and a slave of all, that we can see the kind of Savior he is. When we embrace Jesus as our Suffering Savior we embrace God as he truly is.

God is not some deity far removed from the suffering and pain of this world, who controls its workings and us as though playing with puppets. God is not some genie whose sole purpose is to grant our wishes. God is not some grand Idea who serves as an opiate or therapy for our insecurities and unfulfilled needs. And God is not some Greek fantasy that satisfies our desires and gives us success as long as we fall into line.

God is the author who entered the story in Jesus. God became one of us, like us in every respect but sin, as we read from Hebrews last week. God became a slave and subjected himself to the hostility of this world and was executed as an enemy of the state. God did this to save us from captivity. Or in the words of Mark, God did this to ransom us by suffering and dying on the cross. For early Christians, by the way, this ransom was paid to Satan. They were incensed by any proposal that God would exact such a ransom.

When James and John ask to sit at Jesus's right and left hand, they had no idea what they were signing up for. They thought it was about privilege and position, but Jesus makes it clear that following him is about suffering and death. When we see how Jesus saves, we see who Jesus is and so we see the face of God. And what we see is that God is a suffering servant who invites us – each one of us here today – to become suffering servants who follow the Bruised Healer.

For years, I have taken students to a Mennonite Fellowship in St. Louis to learn more about the Mennonite tradition. Year after year, this is the site that draws the most energy and anger from our students who are thoroughly upset by the Mennonites' commitment to nonviolence. For

many of our students, they see it as a dereliction of duty, a lack of courage, and even a lack of love to live nonviolently in a violent world. The problem with their assessment is that this is what God has done in Christ – he loved his enemies, prayed for his persecutors, and suffered and died at their hands. Why is living non-violently so off-putting to us, even when we are Christians who have been shaped by the story of a Savior on a cross?

Part of the problem is that people have been trained to think of pacifism as being passive. But Jesus was anything but passive – he entered our hostile and violent world and loved his enemies, which is far riskier than killing them. Another part of the problem is we have a hard time seeing or believing that this is how God is, that *this* is the Savior God has determined to be for us in Christ. God is not a violent insurrectionist like Barabbas, but that is who the people chose over Jesus. And if we're honest, we probably would have too. Instead, God is a Suffering Servant, a Bruised Healer, who has chosen to be for us in no other way than the way he saved us through Jesus.

I wonder what it looks like for us at St. Paul's to embrace a life of suffering service. To be sure, we choose suffering all the time on account of our beliefs. We even choose suffering for those we love on account of our beliefs. How else can we understand child-bearing? We know having kids involves suffering, yet we choose to suffer anyway. Or what about Kyrie Irving, the second-best point guard in basketball? On account of his beliefs about the Covid-vaccine, Kyrie is foregoing millions of dollars this year and an enormous contract extension because he won't play at his home arena due to his decision not to get vaccinated. My point is not about whether the decisions to have kids or refuse the vaccine are good or not, it's rather that we make decisions all the time to suffer for things we care about. We choose suffering when we train for sports, get educated for our profession, or decide to love others.

But what does it look like to embrace suffering on account of following Jesus? What does it look like to choose suffering as a matter of discipleship? This is both a personal question – unique to who we are and where God has placed us – and communal, a matter of our church's decision to follow Jesus wherever the Spirit leads us. This probably means, as was recently proposed at our Society Meeting, that we embrace suffering by going to those at the margins. And it may mean that we take risks during a pandemic on account of what the Spirit is calling us to do. Suffering has as much to do with where we go as what we endure from forces outside ourselves. We must never forget that Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem, which is where he knew prophets go to die. I wonder where Jerusalem is for us at St. Paul's.

Today we meet God in the life of a Savior who submitted to suffering and death and calls us to follow his lead. God's triumphant rescue in Psalm 91 can only be understood through the lens of Jesus's ransom, his redemption of us, through suffering and death. In the kingdom of God, God serves and suffers and in so doing, God saves us from sin, death, and the devil. In the kingdom of God, servants and slaves are the greatest.

This is God's way. God is the Bruised Healer. And being disciples means that if we want to follow Jesus, if we want to become great, we need to drink the cup of suffering and be baptized in a death like Jesus's. Getting involved with God will mess you up. By praying the Psalms we

get involved with God, which is why Eugene Peterson warns us, “Be slow to pray” (43, *Working the Angles*). That’s because praying puts us on God’s conditions, rather than our own.

Today we learn that Jesus is the kind of Savior we never would have imagined and never would have chosen. Our Savior is instead a Bruised Healer, who heals us by his bruises. In Jesus we see the face of God, who refused to leave us in the grips of the devil and so emptied himself to become a slave and servant who suffered and died for us. For the world, this sounds like a tragedy, but for Christians it is a triumph. And through this triumph we learn that when we follow Christ as a community of the cross, we can make the words of Psalm 91 our own as we pray for God to deliver, protect, answer, rescue, and be with us because we follow a Bruised Healer who refused to let defiance, death, or the devil have the last word. Thanks be to God.