

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY
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Text: Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he 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, he 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? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Looming behind the gospel story, there's an older story. It's a story that started in Israel long before Jesus' time. It's a story that was first passed around by word-of-mouth, and was later written down. It's a story that grew out of suffering and sorrow. It's a story that was told by people living in exile, who dreamt of returning home and rebuilding their nation. It's a story that was kept alive by generations of people, who lived in the shadow of one empire after another. It's a story that people clung to through years of brutal occupations and failed rebellions. It's a story of longing and hope—longing for peace, longing for justice, longing for deliverance. And the hope that that longing will eventually be fulfilled, and a

new day will dawn, and God's kingdom will come in full.

And all that hope, and all that longing, rested on the shoulders of one person, one promised figure: the Messiah.

It shouldn't come as any surprise, then, that slightly different versions of the story would crop up, with slightly different details. Any story that's been around that long, and meant that much, is bound to evolve over time. So sometimes the Messiah was angelic. Sometimes he was purely human. Sometimes he had a divine birth. Sometimes he had an ordinary birth.

But the one thing that never changed was the idea that the Messiah would free Israel from oppression by overthrowing

whatever empire happens to be ruling the world at the time when he arrived. So, most people thought the Messiah was going to be some kind of military hero, someone who commanded an army, someone who crushed his enemies on the battlefield. I guess if you've been bullied your whole life, and you're looking for someone to save you, you're not going to picture an ordinary person. You're going to picture a champion.

In the gospel, then, when Peter tells Jesus, "You are the Messiah," this is what he's thinking about. He's thinking about this story—the story he's been hearing his whole life; the story his mother whispered in his ear when he was a baby; the story the rabbi reads out loud every time he goes to the synagogue. And for one brief moment, he's picturing Jesus marching triumphantly into Jerusalem, the crowds cheering. And he's imagining himself right there at his side, basking in the glory. And it's exhilarating.

But then it all comes crashing down.

Jesus tells him what's really going to happen when they get to Jerusalem, and we can practically hear the needle scratching across the record. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering," Jesus says. Not victory, not glory, but suffering. "... and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes..." Not welcomed, not cheered, but rejected. "... and be killed..." Not crowned, not worshipped, but killed. "... and after three days rise again," whatever that means. Peter has no idea at this point.

And Jesus says all of this "quite openly," according to Mark, so there's no ambiguity, and later on no one can say, "Maybe he was just kidding" or "Maybe he meant something else." No. Jesus means exactly what he said. And Peter cannot accept it. He cannot accept that the story his people have been telling for hundreds of years, the story that's gotten them through countless disasters, is going to end like this, with the bad guys winning, and the good guy losing in this

painful and humiliating way.

So, he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. He says, "No, you're getting it all wrong! That's not how the story goes. You're not supposed to be a martyr. We have plenty of those. Our history is littered with them. You're supposed to be different. You're supposed to be a conqueror. You're supposed to be a king. So quit talking nonsense, Jesus, and be the person we need you to be."

If we could look inside Peter's mind at this moment, we'd see this beautiful dream he has of Israel's future turning to dust. We'd see this image of a restored nation popping like a balloon someone just stuck a pin in.

He's a really interesting person. He'd make a great character in a novel. He has so much potential, and yet he's so flawed. He has so much faith in Jesus. He truly believes that Jesus is the chosen one, God's anointed. And yet his faith is very much on his own terms. It's very much based on his own expectations and his own needs and wants. Which doesn't make him a bad person. It just makes him human and relatable. I think we all have a little bit of that split-screen going on inside us.

So, the growing edge for Peter, and for us, is to give up whatever plans we have and trust in the plan God has—even if it's not clear, even if we don't understand it, even if it seems like it's not going to work. Which isn't easy. We have to let our vision die so a greater vision can grow in its place.

And I know that sounds dramatic, but I think it's how Peter feels, judging by how upset he gets with Jesus. He's genuinely disturbed, I think because he feels like part of him is dying—this beloved image he has in his mind of what the future is going to look like; this cherished notion he's been carrying around for as long as he can remember.

Maybe that's what Jesus means when he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their

cross and follow me.” Maybe he means, let them abandon their personal agendas, let them put to death their will for their lives, and let them embrace God’s will instead. And in that sense, by losing our lives, as we want them to be, we in fact save our lives, as God wants them to be.

I was actually just talking to someone last week, who was saying something along these lines. She was telling me about difficult times she’s been through in life and how they challenged her faith and made her question her beliefs. But those were the moments, she said, when she would feel God with her in her grief and sorrow, and out of those experiences her faith would deepen and grow. It was as if she had to lose her faith in order to save it. Her old faith had to die in order for a new faith to grow in its place.

I think that’s exactly what Jesus is telling Peter. I think he’s telling him, You have to let go of the story you’ve been telling yourself in order to hear the story God is telling through me. And Peter’s not in a place right now where he can do that. He’s not in a place where he can accept that the story is going to happen, but not in the way he wants it to. He’ll get there eventually, but he’s going to have to go through some difficult times. He’s going to have to see Jesus’ prediction come true. He’s going to have to experience that grief and sorrow. Because it’s only in that moment that he’ll feel God with him, and he’ll know that this is the hope he’s been clinging to all along. Amen.