

2024 Proper 19B

While I was on my way home from my vacation in Nova Scotia, I took the time to visit a certain beach. It's one of my favorite places on the planet. It's in a little village, kind of hidden, not a popular tourist destination. so you have to know which dirt road to turn down to find it.

On that particular day, there was work being done on this road. They appeared to be clearing away a lot of the growth that had sprung up along the edge, though it may have been in preparation for widening and—God forbid—*paving* that little road. Whatever the reason, I was stopped by a guy with one of those STOP/YIELD signs. I waited for him to let me go ahead. And waited...and waited...

Finally a small black pickup truck pulled up, and as it turned around the guy who had been keeping me there pointed at me and then the truck. On the back was a sign in big bold letters that said, "FOLLOW ME. DO NOT PASS."

As soon as I saw it I said to myself, "Oh, I need a photo of that. That'll preach." And I knew exactly which reading it applied to.

The Gospel reading you just heard.

The Gospel of Mark is not especially kind to Peter. In Mark's version of this story, after Peter so boldly states

his belief in Jesus as the Messiah, there is no moment when Jesus gives him a gold star. No naming him Peter, the rock on which Jesus will build the kingdom. Peter doesn't get singled out as someone special.

He does get singled out though, doesn't he? Not in the way he might have liked. As is so often the case, Peter's tongue got him into trouble. (I sometimes wonder if James had him in mind as he wrote the words we heard today.) Peter didn't know when to stop talking.

This passage starts off with Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is. But it's not idle curiosity. He is trying to take the temperature of the situation. Remember, he has just had this life-changing encounter with the Syro-phoenician woman, who showed him that his mission was so much broader than he had imagined. In this passage, he has realized that it's time to move forward. He has been healing the sick, curing those with disabilities, freeing people from their demons—all on a person-by-person basis. He asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" to see if they have figured out that he's not just the latest Miracle Man. It doesn't appear they have, not really. So he moves into the nearer circle.

"Who do *you* say that I am?"

And Peter leaps right in. "You are the Messiah."

But what does that *mean*?

For Peter, it probably meant someone who was going to overthrow Roman rule and establish a new, earthly kingdom of Israel. Ideally, he would include in that an expectation that it would be a kingdom where the poor were shown mercy and generosity, where those with power exercised it justly and didn't mistreat others.

So when Jesus starts talking about rejection and suffering and death, Peter felt he needed to set Jesus straight on the issue. And hadn't he *just* seen Jesus change his mind after someone challenged his understanding of his mission? Peter takes him aside and "rebukes" him.

A note about that word, rebuke. It's the same Greek word used to describe what Jesus does when he drives a demon out of a person. Peter is not pulling Jesus aside and gently suggesting that he is misusing a word. Peter thinks there is something seriously wrong that needs some powerful intervention before it goes too far. The text doesn't explicitly say that Peter thinks Jesus has been overtaken by an evil spirit, but one could make a case that it certainly suggests it.

In response, Jesus turns the rebuke around. "Get behind me, Satan."

This probably doesn't mean Jesus is calling Peter a demon. I don't think Jesus is insulting Peter at all.

If anything, he's acknowledging that it would be very tempting to do as Peter says. To reject the idea of the Messiah as Suffering Servant and become the kind of leader they want. So tempting....just as it was back during those 40 days of temptation in the desert, when he was offered the chance to be just that kind of Messiah, one with full control over earthly powers. Jesus sees the tempter peeking back at him through the face of this dear friend.

So tempting to let Peter have his way.

But Jesus resists. "Get *behind* me."

Jesus is not rejecting Peter. He's telling Peter to remember who he is. A disciple. One who takes his lead from the teacher. Jesus is telling Peter, FOLLOW ME. DO NOT PASS.

It's a crucial moment for Peter. Will he let go of his own expectations of what it means to be the Messiah? Of what the kingdom of God actually looks like? These are people who have spent generations waiting...and waiting...and waiting for the Messiah to show up and lead them where they want to go.

Which is not where Jesus is going.

Messiah Jesus will not achieve victory through violence, but through sacrificial love. Messiah Jesus is not leading

them to some kind of this-world self-rule that overthrows Rome but still follows the rules of Empire.

Jesus is leading them on the road of love that leads to the kingdom of God. He knows that as beautiful and idyllic as that sounds, it's really quite dangerous.

People will be so scared by that love that they can't control, so scared by their own powerlessness in the face of it, that they will seek to destroy it by nailing it onto a cross and watching it die.

Imagine how terrified they must be to realize it didn't stay dead! (But that's a sermon for another day.)

I want to be clear that when Jesus calls on us to take up our cross and follow, it's not a call to suffer for the sake of suffering. It's not a call to resign yourself to accepting some horrible situation as "your cross to bear."

No, the call to follow Jesus is a call to let go of all the things you think you can control and accept the invitation to follow Jesus. To follow him, wherever he leads. To trust that he is leading us where we need to go, even when that means waiting...and waiting...and waiting for him to show us the way.

Follow Jesus. Do not pass.

Amen.