

Faithful Living In a Hissy Fit World
A Sermon On Mark 8:27 – 38
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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.”

Welcome. Welcome to those who have traveled many miles for the purpose of returning to this congregation on this day of celebration. Welcome to our District Superintendent, Joanne Bartelt. It is a blessing to have her share this piece of our year long observance marking the 175th anniversary of this church and its Christian witness in Port Huron. Welcome to Susan Pellowe. We rejoice in the sharing of your talent and we proudly claim you as a daughter of this congregation. Welcome to everyone gathered in this room. We gather to honor the past that has brought us here. We gather to celebrate the blessings God has granted and continues to grant the people of this church. We gather in anticipation of the ministry that is yet to come and the faithfulness of those who will follow after us. In gathering we proclaim that 175 years is but a beginning in the Christian witness of this church and its people.

Our coming together on this day is in itself an illustration of an uncomfortable truth we must all confront. Life brings change. People move. Illness intrudes upon carefully laid plans. Who among our returning guests today ever imagined their present reality back in the day they called Port Huron home? Who among any of us anticipated our present reality back in an earlier time? Change continues. This is true today. It was true as Jesus walked with the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. For this church to make its way into the next 175 years we must rediscover and embrace a faith that will

sustain us. It will not do to sit back and rail hysterically against the changes that are inevitable. How shall we live faithfully in a world resistant to change?

In response to the reality of change we have come to live in a hissy fit world. Reactivity and hysterical predictions of doom and threat attempt to thwart change and convince us that the status quo is nothing less than God's ordained plan. Maybe it started with Peter. Consider Peter's response to Jesus. As they walk toward Caesarea Philippi, Jesus lays out as a matter of fact the suffering that is about to come his way. Some point to this as an example of Jesus' ability to foretell the future. Perhaps it is, but it does not take much visionary power to predict that Jesus, standing against the religious and political keepers of the status quo, was likely to experience significant resistance and potentially violent push back. The power in this passage lies not in that Jesus could see this coming. The power lies in the fact that in seeing it ahead Jesus will not be distracted and is determined to fulfill his holy mission.

Peter on the other hand throws a hissy fit. The text is not that specific. I am adding my own hyperbole. Still, the text tells us that Peter takes Jesus aside to rebuke him for what he is saying. I submit that it takes a considerable measure of hysteria for a disciple to confront and rebuke Jesus. I must conclude that Peter is panicked by the agenda Jesus has put before him. He likes his life at that moment and he does not want it to change. The good times have just begun, and Peter does not want to hear that change lies ahead. More than anything he wants to continue what they have achieved. If Jesus would just play it cool he could avoid nasty confrontations with the priests and the Pharisees and the Roman authorities. Jesus' talk about suffering and persecution and death is just too upsetting. Jesus should chill out, lay low, and keep the good thing going.

Peter's hysteria is accented by Jesus' response. Jesus calls Peter, Satan – the embodiment of evil. It is a remarkably harsh rebuke and must not be ignored.

Hysteria becomes the order of the day whenever the status quo is threatened and the world in which we find comfort begins to change. Lately it seems we are living in an extremely hissy fit world. Television is filled with emotional outbursts claiming that the president of the United States is the anti-Christ, or that death panels are being organized to shorten the lives of senior citizens. It is a measure of the change that is upon us. Daily we are told that the lives we have enjoyed and regarded as our right cannot be sustained into the future. We have known this for a long time, but we have managed to push it to the back of our consciousness. The financial crisis that came upon us a year ago has shown that we can no longer ignore the emerging realities.

A Christian response to this world of change is made difficult if we cling to the notion that God's purpose is to anoint life as we like to live it, or if we cling to the notion that Jesus came to save us from all suffering. Don't get me wrong. I believe in God's power to heal. However, there are distinctions to be made. Healing is possible even when a cure is not. Joy is possible in the midst of suffering. These are distinctions that scripture speaks of all the time. Too often Christianity has been presented as the way good people get what they want out of life. We think that prayer is the way we make our desires known to God. The *New Interpreter's Bible* puts it this way:

Christians frequently think that if we pray enough God will remove all trials from our lives. A family with a drug-addicted teenager might be pressured to "pray harder and the kid will come around," rather than for the strength to care for their child and to find the right treatment and support. Parents whose asthmatic child has life-threatening allergies are convinced that if they pray before the child eats certain foods the child won't have an allergic reaction. One emergency trip to the hospital has not convinced them that perhaps God is trying to tell them something else.

Somehow these devout Christians have grasped the Jesus of the miracles but have ignored the word of the cross. Prayer is important in healing, but prayer is an opening up of ourselves to what God wills, not an exercise in forcing God to do our will.

Living faithfully in this hissy fit world requires that we choose between two possibilities. Will we travel with God as a people of faith and hope, or will our confidence fail? Will we listen to the voice of Peter and divert from the Jerusalem in our future, or will we pick up the cross before us and proceed up the hill to crucifixion and on to the morning of resurrection? If we understand faith as living with a radical trust in God rather than thinking the right thoughts about God, the answer is obvious.

Fortunately for us we have the Gospel of Mark and the story of Jesus' journey with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi. The story begins with Jesus asking his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" He might have said, "What do you think this is all about?" or "Do you have any idea where this is headed?" The question itself is a metaphor pointing to the fact that along with the first disciples we all have our reasons for being here. Some said he was John the Baptist. Others maintained he was Elijah. Peter declared him to be the Messiah. Some of us might say that Jesus brought peace to our troubled hearts. Others are not so sure about Jesus, but identify the church as the place they meet their friends. Still others of us love to sing and we are here for that reason. We all have our reasons for being here. None of them are bad. There is nothing wrong with any of it. But this story in Mark signals the point at which Jesus begins to direct his disciples beyond their particular personal motivation and on toward the greater purpose of his coming. In effect Jesus is telling his disciples that whatever moved them to leave their old lives must now give way to the greater purpose of his coming. Beyond every

Calvary there lies a garden and an empty tomb, the fire of the Holy Spirit and the birth of a new church.

For everyone one of us who will be gone in five, ten or fifteen years there wait two younger hearts eager for the hope and love of Christ. Those younger hearts will require new songs and new prayers and new ways of being the church. Those younger hearts wait for the experience of Christ to move them rather than for talk about Christ to instruct them. Those younger hearts long for a place of meaningful service, not a place on a membership roll. Those younger hearts cry out for relief from a meaningless pursuit of fun.

Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you think I am." Peter replied, "You are the Messiah." The question before us becomes will we follow him as faithful disciples through the suffering and on to the new life beyond or will we throw a hissy fit and deceive ourselves into thinking we can avoid the unpleasantness and remain just as we are. On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus could see the approaching suffering. His choice was to remain faithful and live in a radical trust in God. Eventually Peter would come to understand as well. May we be as wise as Peter.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Mark 8:27 - 9:1 (NRSV)

²⁷Jesus 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?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”[£] ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.” ³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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.” ^{9:1}And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with[£] power.”