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Emory Presbyterian
Mark 8:31-38
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“A Design Flaw?”

Do you ever wonder sometimes why life has to be so hard? Why things are set up the way they are? What with evil and accidents and injustice and whatnot? I mean, why do bad things have to happen, anyway. I'm talking, why were things set up this way in the first place? And death – why was death woven so tightly into the fabric of life? In fact, how come new life can't even come into being without death? Why would God have set things up this way in the first place?

Genesis tells us that God created the world and declared it good. Me, I declare it a mess. If I'd been God, or The Goddess, I like that better, I would have arranged things differently. Very differently. I'd have set it up to where those I loved would be protected from harm, and to where stupid, random, errors of timing or accidents of birth wouldn't destroy people's lives. If I'd been in charge in the beginning, I'd have spread out the resources of the earth so every desert would have ample water, but no island or coastal area would have too much. Ever. There'd be no more tsunamis if I were in charge.

In fact, if I were Goddess of the Universe, I might do away with the whole disruption of death altogether, at least wherever it's not welcome. I'd make death optional, a voluntary experience only for weary souls and worn out bodies who chose it. But no one would have to die 'before their time.' And each person would get to judge when their time was. Or...hmmm...maybe it'd be better to

assign a committee to each person to help them judge when their time had come since some of us tend to get mixed up when we're feeling down or life isn't going our way....

But then, in *my* world, we'd never feel down, would we, because life would *always* be going our way. I mean, I *guess* that would be good. But what if *my* way somehow interfered with *your* way? Who would get to decide which way would rule? Oh, yeah, **I** would, because I'd be Goddess! Cool.

But what if you weren't happy with my decision? Then I'd be the source of your unhappiness, and what **I** want is for everybody to be happy! Hmmm. This is getting complicated.

But still, if you or I had had power over the universe at the beginning of creation, I'll bet we'd have come up with a better scheme of things than what we've got now, what with broken hearts and abused children and aching joints and senseless war all over Creation. If you ask me, there was just some kind of fundamental flaw in the whole design from the very beginning. Although nothing a well-chosen, prayerful committee of thoughtful Presbyterians couldn't have improved upon.

Now that's pretty close to how I imagine Peter is thinking when he's sitting there listening to Jesus carry on about how he's fixin' to undergo great suffering, and be rejected by all the powers-that-be, and then be killed in a really torturous and humiliating fashion. Peter's probably thinking to himself, 'you know, guys, I think we could do better than that. Allow me to point out a few glaring flaws in Jesus' design that really might not work too well for the Movement.'

And so, in his infinite wisdom, Peter draws his Savior aside to rebuke him gently. “Come on now, Jesus,” he cajoles. “Let’s see if we can’t tweak that plan of yours with a little more, uh, positivity. We’re on kind of a roll here, you know. The movement’s going good, folks are getting on board, we’re gaining some momentum – let’s not blow it now with all that doomsday talk, okay? It’s really a downer, you know, all that talk about suffering and rejection and a miserable death. It’s just not good press. And right when people are starting to feel good about you? I’m thinking we might want give a pause to that whole line of palaver, you know what I mean?”

“But now, that healing of the blind guy at Bethsaida, now that was a real hit. We got some serious coverage on it, the news spread like wildfire, more people are seeking you out, starting to call you ‘The Messiah;’ - I think we’ve got something to build on there. So let’s just lose the whole sad-sack, sacrificial death, rise again in three days things, shall we? It’s not gonna sell. Anyway, you know what they say about self-fulfilling prophecies, heh, heh.

And so, given that Peter was Jesus’ best PR man and a trusted old friend, Jesus took his advice and did his best to cultivate a more positive attitude and presentation.

No, that’s *not* what happened, is it? No, Jesus turns on Peter like a cornered wolverine, and hisses at him loud enough for everybody to hear: “Get behind me, Satan!” (Ouch.) “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus spits at one of his very best friends, “for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!”

Peter looks...bewildered. And embarrassed. "What's he talking about?" he asks the other disciples. "Anybody know what he's talking about?"

"Okay, okay," says Jesus, "everybody come close. Come on, all you disciples, come here close so you can hear me. And you folks back there, and over there, y'all come near, too, so I can *tell* you what I'm talking about."

Folks lean in.

"Okay. Here's the drill: you want to follow me, you gotta deny yourself and take up your cross."

"Huh?"

"Okay...let me try it this way: the most important thing to you is your life, right? And for things to go your way? You know, getting what you want? Your just desserts? I know you're willing to work for it and all, but you pretty much expect to be rewarded for your efforts with...I don't know...say...a long and healthy life, a faithful spouse, adoring kids, a satisfying career and a well-diversified retirement portfolio. Right? And immortality would be nice, too, am I right? Okay. Now, think 'human things.' All that falls under the category of human things, the stuff that everybody wants and works for and pretty much feels they deserve. Got it?"

"Okay, so, you want to follow me, you gotta give all that up. Give it *all* up. At least as your top priority. Understand? To follow me you gotta give up everything you think is most important because here's the deal – if all that's most important, then I'm not. Got it? You want to follow me, I gotta be the most important thing.

The disciples look at each other to see if anybody's nodding.

"All right. I don't know how to make it any clearer than this: I AM Life. Okay? I am the *Source* of Life. Come on, guys, how many times have you hear me say it? I am the way and the truth and the life. Lose me and you lose Life. Understand? And what good does it do you to gain the whole world and lose your life?

"On the other hand, if, for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, you *let go* of everything you imagine you can't live without, well, then, irony of ironies, *that's* the choice that's gonna save your life. Because that's when you've chosen me. And I AM Life.Any questions?"

Clear as mud, right? According to Jesus, if we try to save our life, we lose it. But if we lose our life for Jesus' sake, we save it. A confusing, and threatening, pronouncement to those of us who make a stab at following Jesus. But then again, Mark's not a gospel to pull any punches. Nor is Lent a season to soften the unremitting glare of the gospel. Jesus has always had uncompromising demands of his disciples. And he asks the same thing of his disciples today: total and complete surrender, not only of everything we have, but of everything we are. The same thing, in fact, that what was demanded of Jesus himself.

For "though Jesus was in the form of God, writes the apostle Paul in his beautiful hymn to the church in Phillippi, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...and humbled himself, and became obedient to the point death, even death on a cross." (2:6-8) And that surrendering, that humbling, that emptying,

that obedience, those are the 'divine things' on which Jesus has always demanded his disciples to set their minds. And "let the same mind be in you," advises the Apostle.

But mercy! The scope, the depth and breadth and uncompromising threat of Jesus' demand takes my breath away. Surrender everything? All my belongings? All my plans? All my illusions? All my control? I cannot do it, not yet, anyway. Can you?

I think the closest I may ever have come was agreeing to be installed for the first time, which prospect I approach with a trembling I cannot fully name, even to myself. But to surrender unto death?

Now, I just wouldn't have designed salvation that way, would you? It's just too darn hard. Too risky. Too scary. Too crazy. In fact, Jesus' demands seem so hard and so risky and so scary that sometimes I think the whole purpose of mean ole Lent is to shine a spotlight on all our failings so that, for just a while, you and I can escape neither the piercing glare of the gospel of Jesus Christ nor the deepening shadow we cast when we stand in its way. A deer in the headlights – that's how I feel during Lent.

I tell you, you take seriously what the gospel demands of us, and it'll take your breath away. But it'll give it back to you, too. At least that was God's promise to Abraham when God messed with his life; and that's Jesus' promise to his disciples when he messes with ours.

In fact, it wasn't six days after fussing at Peter that Jesus gives up on words altogether and figures out a better way to infuse his disciples with the Holy

Spirit. Instead of dishing out more parables or explanations, Jesus decides to haul his goofy followers up the mountain for a taste of divine union, for a personal experience of communion, and, if they were lucky, a passing glimpse of the glory of God. Jesus must have figured that's what it takes for his disciples to see past the endless flaws in the design of 'human things' to the elegant perfection of the design of 'divine things.'

So he gives up trying to explain why things are the way they are – which the disciples never get anyway, or don't like it when they do. And instead decides to draw his beloved ones up the mountain so they can experience for themselves, past words, past parables, past preaching, that peace that passes all understanding.

And so today, as every Sunday during Lent, you and I are drawn up the mountain to Christ's table where we are invited to pause for just a moment and experience ourselves as God's beloved ones, refreshing our souls with a taste of divine union, a personal communion, and perhaps, even, if we're lucky, a passing glimpse of the glory of God.

To the glory of God. Amen.