

THE GOD WHO IS VS. THE GOD WE WORSHIP

MARK 10:35-45

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³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴²So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

I have said it before, and I will repeat it: we come to church and listen to the reading of scripture and the preaching of a sermon to answer three basic questions: 1. Who is God? 2. What is God up to? 3. How can we hitch on to what God is up to? That's why we're here. And this Sunday's gospel text answers each of those questions.

Who is God? What is God up to? How can we hitch on to what God is up to?

The way that Jesus walks is a way that is so counter to our ways that we have to keep being reminded of its strangeness. Why else does Jesus keep repeating that he is on his way to his cross, where he will suffer and die? This Sunday, we have the third passion prediction in Mark (10:32-45). Three times, Jesus reiterated that he was walking toward the cross.

But, can we blame the disciples for their lack of understanding? A suffering Messiah? Jesus has been introduced to us in the first verse of Mark's Gospel as the "*Son of God—God with us.*" God? God is all-powerful, high, and lifted up. God can do anything God wants. God is always in control. But we are reflecting today on The God who is vs. the God we want to worship.

It's, therefore, a jolt to be told by Jesus that he "*didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.*"

Like the disciples, we must learn and relearn that Jesus Christ is God with us, but not as we had expected. We wanted God to be all-powerful and fix what's wrong with us and the world. But the God we receive in Jesus becomes powerless and submits to the injustice and violence of others as a suffering servant.

So, three times throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples that he is among them as the God they did not expect nor the God they wanted to worship. A God who comes "*to serve and to give.*"

And that would be enough to unpack in a sermon. But in this Sunday's gospel, Jesus does not leave things there. He does not only say that he has come not to dominate and seize power but to serve and to give, but he says that we must serve and give as well.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward and said to Jesus, "*Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.*" And Jesus turns to them and asks, "*What is it you want me to do for you?*" They

respond, *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”* (vv. 35-37)

In asking this, and in asking this way, James and John show they do not have the foggiest notion of who Jesus is and what he expects of them. With Peter, these two have been Jesus’s closest companions. And yet, as they get closer to Jerusalem, their request shows that they still think of Jerusalem as a place of glory rather than the place of the cross. Earlier, Peter was rebuked for this glory-thinking. Now, John and Andrew are rebuked by Jesus. They just do not get it. This just after last week’s text where we notice they did seem to get it when Jesus talked with the rich young ruler.

In our text for today Jesus responds, *“You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”* They replied, *“Sure, bring it on! If some baptism and a little communion is the ticket to glory, we are fine with that.”*

Jesus responds, *“You do not know what you are asking.”* They do not know. Sure, they want to be close to Jesus but are clueless about what that means. *“The cup”* often indicates suffering and judgment (as in Jeremiah 49:12 and Psalm 75:8). And sometimes *“baptism”* is used metaphorically to indicate immersion in some trouble or evil that is to come as in Luke 12:50. So in saying, *“cup,”* or *“baptism,”* Jesus is talking about his death.

The rest of the disciples were angry with James and John. But Jesus patiently taught them, *“Among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be a servant to all. Why? Because I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life for the freedom of many.”* (vv. 41-45)

Jesus follows up on these strong terms by reiterating that the Son of Man *“came not to be served but to serve... and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

Jesus corrects his disciples’ misunderstanding by referring to himself and his work. This is how I am; this is what I am about to do. If you want to hitch on to what I am doing, the only way to do that is to follow me by doing what I do. The disciples have signed on to follow God’s glorious, powerful Son. What they get is service in the name of Jesus, the Suffering Servant.

And we know enough about ourselves to know that we should not be too hard on James and John. They had only had maybe a year or two on the road with Jesus; most of us have been with Jesus longer than that. Because we ought to know Jesus better, it makes it all the more sad that we keep thinking like the clueless disciples believe. We know, when we are honest, about our relentless ambition, our desire for earthly status and power.

We too find the God who is does not look or act like the God we Worship.

It says in the Bible that *“God created man in his own image.”* But let’s be honest enough to admit that we try to create God in our own image. That is to say, we try to shape God to suit our own tastes, our own thoughts, and our own desires.

For example, many Americans believe that God always tilts just a little bit toward America. He cannot possibly love those who are our enemies as much as He loves us. The laboring people see God as wearing a hard hat, while corporate executives picture Him in a pin-stripe suit. Some people believe Him to be a kind and benevolent old man with long, flowing whiskers, while others regard Him as an angry tyrant with fire in His eyes and thunderbolts in His hands.

A leader, in a class of women in Sunday School asked the ladies to give a verbal picture of God—and everyone in the class had a different idea of what God is like. We all have a tendency to make God into what we want Him to be. Various churches sometimes have a tendency to say to others: *“You worship God your way, and we will worship God His way!”* It’s such a nice feeling, isn’t it, to have a God who feels the same way about things as we do. And that nice feeling is as old as the Philistines.

I say that because in I Samuel 5 we read that the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, the visual symbol of the God of Israel. They took it to the temple of their god, Dagon, and they placed the Ark right

next to the statue of Dagon. The next morning, they were astonished to discover that Dagon had fallen flat on his face on the floor. Well, they said that Dagon had been blown over by the wind so they carefully propped him back up on his pedestal again.

Now, that's absurd on the face of it. If Dagon was a god, he ought to have been able to get back on his pedestal by himself. And, in any case, it's clear from Scripture that Dagon had fallen down in reverence before the one true God, the God of Israel. But those Philistines did not see it that way.

The next morning, they discovered to their chagrin that Dagon had fallen on his face again, and this time he was broken in pieces. Surely that would have been enough to turn the Philistines to the God of Israel. But no, that's not what happened. Do you know what the Philistines did? They packed up the Ark of the Covenant and shipped it back to Israel. They wanted no part of a God who was too big to control. They encountered the God who is vs. the god they worshiped.

I see this same thing happening among Christians today. We have our little pet notions about God with which we are so comfortable that when some great new concept of God comes along as God continues to work among us as the Holy Spirit we have a tendency to reject it outright in favor of that with which we have become comfortable. Like the Philistines of old, we want no part of a God who is too big to control. Archeologists have told us much about Dagon. It seems that in ancient Philistia in various parts of the country, Dagon was represented in different ways. For example, along the coast where the fishermen lived, he was portrayed as a fish. Inland, where the farmers were, he was pictured with golden kernels of corn. In both instances the people had fashioned a god who satisfied their desires.

The same thing happens to us. We take a notion from here, an idea from there, a word from a favorite Sunday School teacher, a thought from a sermon—we take these things and weave them together and say: *"This is what God is like."* Little wonder then that the God we build for ourselves looks very much like us. He has the same values, the same ideas, the same tastes. So, it is no wonder that we end up with the problem of the God who is vs. the god we have created and worship.

J. B. Phillips, several years ago wrote a whole book on the subject. He called it, Your God Is Too Small. In that book, he declares that *"many of us have failed to permit ourselves to be grasped by a God who is big enough to account for all of life, big enough to transcend this scientific age, big enough to command our highest respect and admiration, and therefore our willing cooperation."*

I think that's true. We like to make God into what we want Him to be. We do not like to have a God who disagrees with us. We prefer to have a nice little God we can control, one who sees things the same way we do, one with whom we can be comfortable.

And I would suggest to you that that is precisely what put Jesus on His Cross; the fact that He came talking about a God too big to be controlled. And the political and religious leaders of the day—and even the pew sitters in the congregation—couldn't stand that kind of talk. When Jesus said these things in Nazareth, they ran Him out of town. And when He said these things in Jerusalem, they sought to do Him in.

I think today's gospel implies that it's hard to remember who we are because we keep getting confused about who God is.

So, back to the three questions to which today's gospel answers:

1. *Who is God?*

God is the One who has come among us who surprises and disrupts our notions of God. God is the one who comes among us as a servant to those in need, so much so that he ends up serving us sinners by dying on the cross because of us. It's as if God said, *"You want to know who I am and what I'm up to? Then look upon the cross, and you see me at my most godly."*

2. *What is God up to?*

God is the One who keeps patiently teaching us, putting up with us, transforming our notions of what is and what isn't. God is the One who healed the sick, fed the hungry, gives an open-handed invitation to all the suffering, sick, and sinful ones. The One who serves us by going to the cross because of us, then rising from the

dead and returning to us to keep teaching us, healing us, and inviting us to take up the cross and live lives of service.

3. *How can we hitch on to what God is up to?*

We are to dare to take Jesus as our model and let go of our ceaseless scramble for power, honor, and glory. We are to serve as he served, to work with him in his continuing salvation of the world by showing the world a different path than the world walks. Want to be with Jesus and learn more about him? There's no way to be close to Jesus without getting down with him in humble service. You're here today in church to worship, to learn from, and to listen to Jesus. I think this Sunday's gospel says the way to do that is to go forth from church and serve as he served, doing our part to hitch on to what he is doing in the world, serving those in need, embracing and protecting the most vulnerable, loving even when folks are unloving and unlovable.

As a pastor, I know that I have been called to work with Jesus, to try to conform my life to his life. And so have you. In your baptism, you signed on with Jesus, even if many of you were baptized without knowing much about Jesus or into what you were getting. Well, now you know.

Over the past few Sundays, we have focused on Jesus and his call to his disciples, "*Follow me.*" I observe that many people are attracted to Jesus, admire his love and concern, and are glad to follow him, with a notable exception of the rich young ruler who walked away. But then, as in today's gospel, Jesus talks about the peculiar shape of lives caught up in discipleship. Humility. Service.

At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, the disciples responded positively to Jesus's call to follow him. And yet, midway, the disciples revealed they had no idea that Jesus's way meant the way of humble, self-sacrificial service.

So, in following Jesus, the challenge is not just to walk with Jesus when things are nice but also with Jesus—the Son of God who humbly walks the lowly way of service to his cross. Not with Jesus to the folks we think God, through his Son Jesus ought to be walking with, but with Jesus to the places the wind of the Holy Spirit has blown and the people who were embraced by that Spirit—people we have decided are not God's people. So, we are faced with the dilemma of Worshiping the God who IS vs. the God we worship.