
Lent: Where are we going?
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
February 28, 2021
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Based on Mark 8:27-38

If we turned today's gospel reading into a play, would anyone here want to play Peter? Just picture the scene. Jesus is surrounded by his disciples. They are not only his friends, but are also the group that has been following Jesus around. They presumably know Jesus as well as anyone does. Imagine being a part of that group. Imagine hearing those same two questions.

The first question is pretty easy. Jesus asks, "who do other people say that I am?" Well, that's simple enough. The disciples would have interacted with the local people as they traveled around. They would have heard what the local people had to say about Jesus. Their answer requires only that the disciples report what they have heard in their travels. They didn't have to take a personal stand.

[image: who do you say that I am?]

The second question is a lot harder. Jesus asks, "but who do you say that I am?" Wow. That does not just require listening to other people. It requires thought, insight. It requires risk. It requires vulnerability. It requires personal commitment. And Peter takes the risk of declaring that he believes that Jesus is the messiah. And Jesus seems to accept that label. But then, Jesus describes what that label means to him. And for Jesus it means a life of service, suffering, rejection, and even his own death.

And that's where the fur starts to fly. Because Peter starts to correct Jesus. And at that point, Jesus calls Peter the devil. What is going on here? Early on in our story Peter says that Jesus is the messiah and 4 verses later, Jesus calls Peter the devil. Someone did not have their morning cup of coffee, that's for sure.

One clue as to what is going on here is embedded in the words that are used. In the translation I used Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan". Does that phrase sound familiar to you? That same phrase is used near the very beginning of the gospels, when Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil 3 times. You may remember

that after resisting temptation 3 times, Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan”. Jesus just used the exact same words on Peter. Was Jesus being tempted again - this time by Peter? And if so, what exactly was the temptation?

[image: Simon zealot]

I would love to now share with you the story of Simon’s temptation scene from the Rock Opera “Jesus Christ Superstar”. But I won’t. Because we did that on Nov 22 of last year, so I don’t want to do it again. But in brief summary, Simon points out to Jesus that he has a lot of supporters. Over 50,000. And that if Jesus would just start preaching hatred of Rome, those 50,000 could be incited into violence against Rome. Jesus could then become a military ruler, which was one of the ways to imagine the messiah.

I suggest that the same thing was happening in our gospel today, but from the flip side. Jesus states this his image of messiah is a person with little power, a suffering servant, someone whose ministry may even involve their own death. Basically, the exact opposite of a military messiah.

When Jesus lays out his image of a peaceful messiah, Peter rebukes Jesus. Peter hoped that Jesus would be a military messiah. Even so, Jesus could simply have said, “my little lamb, you don’t understand”. The fact that Jesus said, “Get behind me, satan” suggests that Jesus himself was tempted by the image of military messiah. The strong words from Jesus tell us that Jesus did feel a very real temptation.

In fact, I would suggest that perhaps we are all tempted by the same thing - but in a modern context. So, what is this temptation for us today? If we consider the tension between a messiah of peace and a military messiah, how are we drawn into this conversation?

[image: door of opportunity]

I see this difference most clearly in terms of one thing - control A military messiah would come and force the world to obey. A messiah of peace would come and open the door of peace to everyone, but would allow each person to walk through that door - or not! A military messiah would want to control people. A messiah of peace would not feel the need to control other people.

What Jesus do you follow? Do you follow a Jesus that demands our submission?

Or you you follow a Jesus that invites us into new life, leaving the choice to us. I'm sure you can hear it already. You think I'm going to invite us to give up for Lent our need to control other people. Well, we'll see.

But first, I'm reminded of a story about an office employee in a large company. The employee started working for the company with high hopes, not only for meaningful work, but for friendships and new relationships. But they soon discovered that many of the employees created a very toxic work environment. There was lots of negative talk. There was a lot of gossip. There was tons of drama. There was lots of back-stabbing and politics. The employee had tried having constructive conversations with their fellow workers, and gave them lots of advice on how they could behave better, but nobody seemed even interested in having a less toxic workplace. So, after awhile, the employee went to HR and said, "I really can't take it here, I have to quit". The HR person asked why, and the employee named in great detail the nature of the toxic work environment, none of which was news to the HR person.

[image: full glass of water]

The HR person said, well if you want to leave, you can do so of course, but first, I would like to request that you perform one short task. I want you to take a glass and fill it to the brim with water. Then, walk around your work floor 3 times without spilling a single drop of water. The employee thought this was a very strange request, but they respected the HR person and figured this task would only take a moment anyway. So the employee filled a glass of water - right to the brim - and made 3 laps around their work floor without spilling a drop. The employee then went back to HR to report their success. The HR person asked, while you were walking around your work floor with the glass of water did you notice any back-stabbing? The employee answered, no. Did you see anyone gossiping? No. Did you notice any toxic behaviours? No. Did you see any drama? No. Do you know why you didn't see any bad behaviours? No. The HR person said, when you walked with your very full glass of water, trying to not spill a drop, you focused on your task at hand and didn't have any energy to waste on seeing what other people around you were doing. That's why you didn't notice any toxic behaviours. And if you did the same thing in your job - focused on your own work - you would not notice

toxic behaviours either, or at least what you did notice would affect you far less. To improve your work environment you do not need to control all your co-workers - you just need to control yourself and focus on your job. The employee stayed and made a wonderful career in that company.

When we focus on important priorities, we don't have the time or energy to pay attention to all the drama around us, the mistakes that other people make, the gossip, politics, negativity, etc. Toxic people are everywhere. If we focus on our priorities, our own growth, our own excellence, then we won't be as much affected by the negativity that is around us. We really do have a lot of choices we can make. And one choice we can make is to give up our need to control other people.

That's true on a personal level. It's also true on the level of the church. This week I received a form letter from a local resident that presumably went to many local clergy. This resident is incensed by the ongoing story that an Alberta pastor - James Coates - is being detained for violating local health orders by holding worship services that do not follow COVID-19 guidelines. If you have been following that story, local health officials have reached out to Coates for months to help him understand the pandemic restrictions. Coates believes that God has called him to lead worship, and that should supersede any governmental restrictions. He also does not believe that COVID is very serious. Some of Coates supporters carry signs that say, "Christ is king, not Jason Kenney". Coates himself says, "My first loyalty is to obey God, not the government". And if you are curious, the form letter urged me to open our church right now - not because it is safe - but simply to support Pastor Coates. And yes, I did of course provide a pastoral response to the person who sent me the letter.

For me, the most interesting part of this is about people's need for control. I find it fascinating that in stories like this (and there are plenty of other that focus on restaurants), the conversation starts with the pandemic. And very quickly, the whole conversation spirals out of control to not even mention COVID or the pandemic. In this case, the story very quickly spins into a story about control. Coates pretends this is about whether God or Jason Kenny are king, but in the process, makes himself the king. Coats wants to control the government. Coates acts as if the pandemic never existed, and many people

want to live in that world too so they support him.

But you and I live in a world where the pandemic actually exists. I would love to tell you that COVID is a conspiracy and we can get back to normal today. But I care too much about you to say that. A loving response to the pandemic takes a lot more effort than the childish response of simply stating that I want to do it my way, as Coates says.

Personally, I struggle to understand Christians who believe that if we do not physically gather on a Sunday, that somehow we are letting God down. At the same time, I do understand our church members who want to gather. This building and this space are important to us of course. Remember, I'm still looking forward to my first proper Sydenham-Heritage meal! And I am pleased to actually be in this space as I speak these words today. At the same time, I will confess if I had recorded these words in my basement, I would have used the same words. Any space can become sacred space.

The temptation Jesus faced - from Peter - is a temptation we all face. The temptation to believe that we need to be powerful and control other people. But I believe that Jesus's ministry invited people to find their own healing and salvation. No coercion. No compulsion. No force. When Jesus told the rich young ruler to give away his possessions, the ruler walked away dejected. Jesus sighed, and let him go. Jesus's ministry was an invitation. Not a command.

[image: cross]

We claim that we want to follow Jesus. But I will admit it's hard to get excited about following Jesus to the cross. Earlier in Jesus's ministry, the main work was travelling around, preaching, teaching, and healing people. It was easy to support that project. It is easy to support the teaching, healing, Jesus. But we are not in Kansas anymore. Because here - today - as Lent continues and as Easter looms. We are forced to face an image of Jesus as a suffering servant who sees that his destiny leads to his own death. In our gospel story the disciples must have started asking very deep questions about what they had gotten themselves into. It's much easier to cling to the illusion that Jesus was only meek and mild, that he only believed in healing.

We all need to give up something for lent. The good news is you don't have to give up chocolate. The less-good news is that we need to give up control and illusion. My

Abindgon Commentary (1951) puts it this way, “In Lent, giving up illusion is the primary sacrifice: illusions about God, the world, safety, self-satisfaction; or, even clinging to the easier, friendlier Jesus of Galilee and Epiphany rather than traveling with the suffering Jesus of Jerusalem and Holy Week.”

We need to hear Jesus's story for who he was, which was deeply radical. We have to give up any attempt to control and limit Jesus’s ministry and see if for what it was. Which was - and still is today if we allow it - deeply invitational. We do not need to control other people. We just need to be loving.

Are you ready for Lent? Are you really ready? The cross beckons. The cross awaits. Our journey continues.

Amen.