

# Vocation

Mark 8:27-38  
Faith Mennonite Church  
March 4, 2012  
Hermann I. Weinlick

A few weeks ago in the adult class on worship, it was asked, what do you expect in worship? As I reflected on it, my own answer was, first, some sense of God's involvement in today's world, perhaps in my life, perhaps in the lives of others, and, second, some sense of how I may be part of God's work in today's world. In other words, my expectation in worship has to do with vocation—what does God want us to be or do? Today's Gospel from Mark 8 has to do with vocation.

The Bible does not spend time with the question, Does God exist? Is there a God? Rather, the question is: since God is, how should we then live?

The Bible sometimes speaks well of human authorities, and some believers like to stress those portions that ask for submission to those in authority, in family or government. But even stronger is the questioning of all human authorities: The words from today's call to worship, from Psalm 22, talk about God as ruler. In the Lord's Prayer we pray every Sunday we say some amazing things, some rather provocative things: "Your kingdom come. . . . The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours." What are we to make of these?

We have cities named for political figures. What city is our nation's capital? What city is capital of the state east of us? Today's Gospel is set, I think deliberately, in Caesarea Philippi, a town named after Caesar, the head of the Roman Empire, worshiped as divine, and Philip, the son of the King Herod who, out of fear for his own throne, orders the slaughter of the innocents that is the ending of the Christmas story of the wise men from the East. In a sense, all authority figures are competing with God and need to be put in their place, which is behind why we, like most but not all Mennonite congregations, do not have a national flag in our worship space and question whether military service is compatible with faithful Christian living. Of course there has not be agreement on what this practically means, in relation to, for instance, military service, taxes, treatment of immigrants. Feminist biblical scholarship reminds us that husbands and fathers also need this critique of authority figures.

In this space, in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his followers a question, Who am I? His followers, good Jews as they are, are reminded immediately of the story in the Bible as they knew it, what we call the Old Testament, of Moses and a burning bush. Moses meets God in this bush and asks for God's identification. God says, "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be." The burning bush was the start of a slave rebellion we call the exodus.

Eventually Peter blurts out to Jesus, "You are the Messiah." That word, usually translated "Christ" in Greek, simply means anointed; that means oil has been poured on your head as a sign that you in some way represent or serve God. The word was used in the Old Testament of prophets, who spoke for God, of priests, who represented people before God in worship, of kings, who were to lead the Hebrew nation in living as God wanted. The Jewish people who gave us this Old Testament, had a sense that their nation had a special relationship to God to obey God and show to the world God's goodness and God's intent for human beings. In calling Jesus "**the** Messiah," Peter is saying that in some definitive way Jesus is God to us and for us.

Jesus accepts what Peter says, but then takes the conversation in a completely new direction. "I may be the Messiah, but that doesn't mean what you think it does about God, or me, or yourself! The Messiah will be rejected, will be put to death, will then triumph over death."

There is no mention of cross in this text, but in that society, the cross as a means of execution was used primarily for political dissidents and the poor, the lower classes.

Christians have usually seen this passage as about Jesus. Who is Jesus? Is he just a wise man or a good man? But this story is more centrally about the character of God. What is God like? Is God like a cosmic policeman, keeping an eye on us to make sure we are not speeding? Is God a cosmic IRS, collecting our taxes? Or is God more like Jesus,

- concerned to help those on the margins (as Mark VanSteenwyk reminded us three weeks ago, those who are “unclean”)
- eager for us to have the full lives we are made for
- excited about showing us a different way of life, a more peaceful life
- than our normal human behavior based on getting even and getting our fair share
- convinced that all life is of concern

This story is about the question, **does this guy Jesus really represent God, really show God to us?**

What is the message Jesus has for Peter and these other men and women? First, he said, “Follow me.” The first Christians, taking this very literally, called themselves, or were called by others, the Way. Which assumes that we were going in the wrong direction. In many ways we know we are going in the wrong direction. Jesus invites and says, “I have some sense of the right direction. Get behind me. Come, follow me.” The first generations of Christians sporadically experienced persecution, including crucifixion, but Christians came to believe, I think rightly, that that was not what Jesus had in mind for everyone. Luke, who wrote his Gospel a little later than Mark, to help understand what Jesus meant, added a word: “Follow me *daily*.”

Frederick Buechner, novelist and Presbyterian minister, writes about vocation the following. He is thinking about work, but he could just as well be speaking more generally about life:

There are different kinds of voices calling you to different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the superego or self interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that you need most to do and the world needs most to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement one, but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you’ve missed requirement two. On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met number two, but if most of the time you’re bored and depressed by it, the chances are you haven’t only bypassed number one, but probably aren’t helping your patients much either. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

It appears that Jesus knew more about what might touch the “deep gladness” of the disciples than even they did. Eugene Peterson, in his Bible paraphrase *The Message* words a portion of the Gospel like this: “Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?” One of the things the Bible says again and again, which is hard to get our minds around, which is frightening, but which is also encouraging, is that God sees possibilities in us that we do not see ourselves.

The story of Abraham and Sarah, mentioned in the Romans text and illustrated with the candles on the bulletin cover, representing the many descendants of Abraham, is about God seeing possibilities that Abraham and Sarah did not see. The Nobel conference at Augsburg this week had as a speaker F. W. de Klerk, the white South African political leader who shared a Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela. While South Africa is a nation with many problems, it

is also a place where major political change took place without violent revolution, a possibility few foresaw.

Which leads me to the second thing Jesus did, the second part of his message. He gathered a group of people to live this story and spread this story.

In a Sunday morning adult education class a few weeks ago, one member said that the thing that people come to worship for is **comfort**. It is possible to take that as a negative thing; we come to feel good, to get away from all the troubles of the world around us. But it is also possible to take that positively: we have comfort in a common identity as followers of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who wants not to overwhelm us; who desperately wants us to live better, fairer, richer lives; who has clues to dealing with the troubles of life.

As we as individuals try to understand vocation, how we are called to live as followers of Jesus, the church also has a vocation. Let me suggest two aspects of our vocation as church.

First, one aspect of our vocation is to try to help us understand how God is working in our world. In an adult class, one member spoke about how paintings in one room in the Chicago Art Institute help him to experience the excitement of life. I recently heard a friend tell of how in a conversation with a high school student about jazz he felt God working. Last month about 25 women of the congregation were on retreat, in part to ask how God is working in their lives. Adult classes in the Bible and Sunday morning sermons may help us understand both how worked in the past and may be working now. When people unite with the congregation, and at some other times, we hear stories of how God is working in our lives.

Second, we try to live out, both in our congregational life and individually the Way of Jesus. The STAR program tries to help people who have suffered trauma to discover alternatives to the world's path of revenge and retaliation. Our support of the Brethren Mennonite Council and openness to LGBT persons is an attempt to share the welcoming spirit of Jesus. Ten Thousand Villages attempts to honor some people in "developing" nations both both to have more share in the world's economy and to preserve some special creative skills. Our meals together often help us through diversity in menu better to appreciate the diversity of humanity. Missio Dei reminds us of the needs of those who are homeless and our need to review our understanding of money. Our sharing and prayers in worship call us beyond concern for ourselves.

And in lots of other ways we individually try to live faithfully that Way: caring for our children, teaching adults and children, relating to our neighbors, living by hope rather than fear, working with those whose bodies are failing, helping good food get to our tables, speaking for those whose voices are weak, living thankful for God's abundance rather than just scrambling to make sure we have our share of the world's scarce resources.

Our Communion reminds us of the Jesus whom we follow, whose Way we are on, who promises to be among us. The cup reminds us that the Way is difficult.

"Follow me." That is a call from Jesus to a few fishermen of the first century. It is a call to understand differently who God is, what God is like, and to live accordingly. It is a call to us a church. It is a call to you and to me.