

Second Sunday in Lent

CHOOSING SIDES

Mark 8:31-38

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

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. 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."

DIAGNOSIS: The Wrong Side – The Lost Life

Step 1: The Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Addicted*

Up to this point in Mark's gospel Jesus' ministry appeared to be moving onward and upward, much to the delight of his followers who loved tagging along with a miracle worker. Little did they know that such was precisely the temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness (1:13; Matt.4:1-11; Luke 4:1-12) when Satan suggested that he could grab the glory and avoid the suffering. While Jesus resisted, we are no match for Satan's ploy. We are addicted to the easy way of doing everything. We prefer the use of alcohol and drugs as an escape from facing our problems. We like the good feelings we get at Christmas and Easter and loathe the hard work of Advent and Lent. We love what promises to get us out of trouble, unwilling to pay the price of getting through it. And Peter becomes the spokesperson for all of us, as he unwittingly and quite humanly (v. 33), "rebukes" (v. 32) Jesus for choosing the path of suffering. Imagine, we are ready to rebuke Jesus for being on the wrong side! How wrong is that!

Step 2: The Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Seduced*

Not only are we addicted to the easy outs, we actually want to be seduced. We come into this world committed to the wrong side, opposing God, defending our choices. In the process we cozy up to Satan's "empty promises." With Peter we have no difficulty siding with a deity who works miracles for us, gives us emotional highs, and promises us prosperity, wedded as we are to our idols. And Jesus "rebukes" (v. 33) us, along with Peter, for our folly of choosing the wrong side, for, as he says, being "ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation" (v. 38). Having the wrong faith, we end up on the wrong side, opposing Jesus. How wrong is that!

Step 3: The Final Diagnosis (The Eternal Problem) : *Rejected*

To our surprise, and our eternal regret, on the wrong side, we are left "behind" (v. 33) with Satan, "the father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan promises that we can "gain the whole world" (v. 36) by choosing his side, though he knows full well that it will

mean “forfeiting” (v. 36) our life, which is to share his downfall and death. What could be worse for us than to discover too late that the “Son of Man [Jesus himself] will be ashamed” (v. 38) of us eternally when the right side has been disclosed and we rejected it? How wrong is that!

PROGNOSIS: The Right Side – The Saved Life

Step 4: The Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Chooses the Cross*

Unwilling to be upstaged, Jesus will not allow that to be the last word, not without making his choice. The good news is that Jesus, fighting for us, rebukes Satan (v. 33), knowing already what it will take to destroy Satan’s power over us. From the beginning of his ministry, by John’s baptism, by his driving out the demons, by his healing all manner of illnesses, Jesus identifies with our demon-possessed state, and in each and every encounter he gives up something of his power to others, receiving the destructive power of evil into himself. Finally, Jesus tells his followers, four times actually in Mark’s gospel (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; 10:42-45), that he will deliver us from our bondage to Satan by nothing other, and nothing less, than his suffering and death (v. 31). On the cross, Jesus will lose all of his power, dying in weakness and shame, while the world, including Satan, is convinced that he has chosen the losing side. The irony, however, is that in losing his life as an offering to God on our behalf, Jesus was saved and so are we, as the Father raised him from death as Lord of all—of all powers, all threats, all false promises, all and every bondage of sin and death that own us. All along Jesus was on the right side, on God’s side. Therefore, choosing us when we did not choose him (John 15:16), as Martin Luther penned in his “Mighty Fortress” hymn, “For God himself fights by our side,” Jesus

offers us his victory and life. How right and good is that!

Step 5: The Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Cross to Jesus*

And so, Jesus calls us to a life of faith, to come over to his side. According to Mark's witness and purpose, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (1:14-15). The life of faith for most of us began in our baptism, when God chose us to be his dear children. In the baptismal liturgy we were asked, "Do you renounce the devil and all his empty promises?" Also, "Do you believe in God the Father...in Jesus Christ...in the Holy Spirit?" The time had come to move from the wrong side to the right side, to die and rise with Jesus. The life of faith is now one of rebuking evil: all the ways we try to save our lives by clinging to ourselves and our things at all costs, by choosing the demons and turning ourselves over to false gods and lords, despising the cross. The life of faith is that of embracing the One who was despised, who sided with us in our weakness and shame. To believe the good news is to side with the Crucified One, suffering the loss of all things, as the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, "regarding them as rubbish, in order that [we] may gain Christ and be found in him...becoming like him in his death..." (Phil. 3:8-10). That is the life of faith, losing one's life in Christ, "and for the sake of the gospel," as the only way that we will "save it" (v. 35). How right and good is that!

Step 6: The Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *We Cross to Others*

There are other life choices to be made. The Gospel of Mark ends abruptly, the final piece of good news being that the Crucified One has been raised, with "the young man" (16:5), sitting on the right side of the tomb (pardon the pun), urging

the women to go and tell everyone that “he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7). In other words, choose now who is Lord for you, going back to Galilee where it all started, to the lowly places where the sick, the depressed, the hungry, the demoniacs, any and all who find that they are owned by powers hostile to what God intends for them. Go and lose your life for them. Let the power of Jesus’ love go out from you. Side with them and invite them to side with the One in whom “the kingdom of God has come near” (1:15). How right and good is that!