

Sermon delivered at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church  
Croton-on-Hudson, NY  
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Mark 8:27  
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In the Creation account of the Judeo-Christian tradition, humanity begins as a bonnie and blithe experiment in rational creature-hood by a relatively inexperienced God. According to that story, aside from one provision, the first human creatures play and eat freely in their garden. That experiment, however, comes crashing down when this God shockingly realizes that the very gift of rationality and free choice given to the human beings is the very quality that can enable those creatures to desire something other than God. There is temptation in the system, temptation to not follow God's will. And as we are apple-aware, the creatures do choose something other than God. They are punished for their flawed decision making and sent away from the garden. This is regardless of the possibility that the events might have been at least partially the manufacturer's liability. God did create them and give them free will. But whatever the culpability, cause, or events, we no longer, if we ever did, live in such a magnificent garden, and much of life is anything but bonnie and blithe. There is pain. There is hunger. There is difficulty in our world.

Welcome to today's light-hearted, filled with levity sermon. Which brings me to what I want to question today: Do you think that God wants us to suffer? I mean, we do many times suffer, and God created us, allows us to suffer. And our suffering, like our wars, do not seem to have an endpoint. And before you anxiously answer, "No! God does not want us or anyone else to suffer" listen to the words from Jesus in this morning's Gospel. From Mark we hear, "Then, Jesus 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 again." And what seems interesting to me is that if Jesus is supposedly the model human being, the person whom we should shape our lives after, and he MUST suffer, then what must this mean for us? Should we be suffering servants for our God? We cannot so easily dismiss the possibility.

Historically speaking, many of the first Christians did indeed believe that self-denial and even in some cases self-inflicted suffering were integral to following Christ. They pointed to the *via dellarosa* and the way of the cross as the way that we should all walk. And such a reality made sense.... for THEM. The early Christians did, after all, suffer. They were first separated from the synagogues. And then, they faced penalization, and potentially death, by the Roman authorities. And even after Rome de-criminalized Christianity, such an understanding of radical discipleship persisted. Many Christians could not cope with a socially-sanctioned Christianity, could not believe that following Jesus could be so easy. Many fled to live in the desert where life was more suitably harsh. This was the foundation of monasticism. Christians suffered at the hands of Romans, and when suffering was no longer required, they, in some cases pursued self-inflicted suffering instead.

But how could I, of course, living in Post-modernity, joining a good progressive congregation, really believe that God wants us to suffer. If you were wondering, no I do not. I do not believe that God wants us to suffer. I do not wear a solice, the painful, pinching, pointy band some drastic monastics have worn around their legs to piercingly focus themselves on God. I am not nor will I ever wear a hair-shirt. But I believe that the reason that Jesus says that he MUST suffer is because he realizes something about us humans that we often do not. Jesus seems to understand that most of human suffering is caused by humans, and most suffering that is not caused by humans is probably exacerbated by humanity, simply look at Hurricane Katrina and the gentleman from my own hometown, Michael Brown of great FEMA fame (a bit of trivia about your new Rector; he was my mock trial coach in high school). But whenever Jesus talks about suffering, he is referring to suffering inflicted by humans and not God.

But this is not a sermon of shame. Please do not misinterpret it as such just because I admit that humanity is a mess. I am not preaching judgement. For as a good post-modern progressive preacher, I believe that as much as God does not want us to suffer, God is also not interested in judging our limited lives. But I do believe that Jesus offers a response to our ways, and most of our suffering, a response detailed in today's Gospel. Although I have recounted part of what Jesus said, the where and the why of those very phrases are as important as the words. For the where and why of this passage shows us Jesus' response to humanity and our ultimate answer to the question of human suffering.

The where: at this point in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus continues his sojourn into Gentile lands. We've been in pagan territory for a few weeks now. And this week, Jesus and the disciples are in Caesarea Philippi. And the name says it all. Caesar-*ea*. This is Roman land. And there, one of the largest temples for the god Pan stood tall and proud. And in the midst of that temple, Jesus asks the disciples to define who he is. Talk about contrast. And Jesus hears the familiar response: that some say that he is, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets," And we hear that at least Peter understands that Jesus is the Messiah.

Which brings me to the "why" of Jesus' words. I can almost hear the Disciples laughing and mimicking those insipid Graeco Romans who worshiped a deity that was half-goat and half man, as Pan was. I can hear Simon Peter declaring and comparing such a god to theirs and their Jesus the Christ. Peter, after all, believed that Jesus would become the next warrior king, the next David and Solomon. Peter must have convinced himself that Jesus would eventually tear down the Temple dedicated to Pan in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus must have been frustrated by such a misunderstanding. Jesus, once again, endeavors to teach Peter and the others what it means to be the Messiah, the anointed.

And Jesus says that he MUST suffer. But the reason that Jesus must suffer is not because Jesus wants us to suffer or because God demands that Jesus suffer for our sins. That seems like a deal one would strike with the god Pan rather than our God. Instead, Jesus suffers because of the misunderstanding that Peter exemplifies. Jesus understands that because people misunderstand who he is, they will be threatened by him, because they misunderstand how God operates, humanity will kill him. Jesus could have demanded power. He could have summoned the forces of heaven to destroy that Temple in Caesarea Philippi, or anything else for that matter. And yet Jesus refuses power, and his non-violence, unconditional love, and his new ordering of society

will threaten to the point of suffering. And so Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” And Satan does not refer to some spiritual entity with horns and a pitchfork but to its literal translation, “The adversary.” Peter’s understanding of who Jesus will be is an adversary to who Jesus really is.

And Jesus was right. He does suffer. He suffers as many have and less than some. But, Jesus meets that suffering not by casting it out, demanding respect, or conjuring vengeance. He never tears down the temple in Caesarea Philippi. He instead offers up forgiveness, mercy, and kindness, even as his perceived threats nail him to a tree. Many Christians have taken these words of Jesus and the crucifixion to demand that God demanded the life of Jesus in some sick, sadistic satiation for our sins. But God did not demand such suffering. Humanity did, our misunderstanding of God did and does. We were tempted and chose something other than God. But to the question of whether God wants us to suffer, the answer is still no, and that is revealed to us in the resurrection. With the crucifixion, we are taught how to confront threats and suffering in this world, to not back down but also not to engage it. And in the resurrection, we see Jesus come back to life. And if God had wanted us to suffer, Jesus would have come back with vengeance and wrath. But instead, he comes back in peace and again with forgiveness. And from those two events, we know that death, pain, suffering, cannot contain or conform the life-giving love of God. And that is our hope, that is how we deal with suffering. We trust that God loves us, that God forgives us, and that even if we take a bite... of temptation, we are loved and liked. And if the world takes a bite out of us, and we suffer, God will restore us and resurrect our world as God did God’s son.

True, that does not provide a panacea to our suffering, but it gives us a way to deal with it, and a means to choose and trust another way, a way to choose the peace and life-giving spirit of God. Knowing what we know about God from Jesus, I could never believe that God threw out humanity from the Garden. Instead, the garden was and is always there laid out before us, we just have to choose it, choose the way of Jesus, and trust that even if the world does not seem like a garden, it is being resurrected even as I speak.