

We have reached the halfway point of Mark's story of Jesus of Nazareth. So far we have heard about healings, teachings and miracles. But now, the narrative turns toward Jerusalem and the end of everything (or the beginning of everything). Now for the first time Jesus asks his disciples about his identity: "Who do people say that I am? But who do you say that I am?"

There was probably a bit of hesitation and foot shuffling in the group. They had left everything in order to follow this charismatic man, so they had surely speculated amongst themselves about who, exactly, he was. Ultimately, it's good old go-for-it Peter who jumps in. "You are the Messiah."

Then Peter spoils his half-right answer. When Jesus says he will be rejected, arrested and put to death, Peter takes him aside from the group for a private wood-shedding. "This can't be allowed to happen to you."

But Jesus immediately turns back to the whole gathering to say that Peter is speaking words of temptation from Satan. He says that not only is it his true call to go to Jerusalem, be crucified and rise again; it's also the call for every disciple. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For 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."

Sometimes it is difficult for us who are already familiar with this story to understand how it must have been for those who were actually living it, moment by moment. We, of course, have known from the start that Jesus is the Messiah – it says so in the very first sentence of the book. And we already know that he will be shamed, tortured and crucified; that he will rise again after death. But for the first disciples this was such a new and horrifying teaching that they seem to have not even heard the part of it about 'rising again' and wouldn't have known what it meant anyway.

They had expected that being the companions of a famous and powerful teacher would be a fulfilling vocation, leading to recognition and approval. Now they are told that it is about crosses and death. And this unwelcome bombshell is dropped on them in a very unwelcome location.

They are not on their familiar home ground of Galilee, but in the thoroughly pagan territory of Caesarea Philippi. This was the city built by the puppet-king, Philip, named to honor himself and the Roman Emperor who had put him on the throne. It was a city famous for worship of the gods, Pan, and Baal, as well as for emperor worship.

The disciples had been hoping for one who would return Israel to military power and independence. But their location in the presence of the unbeatable war-machine that was Rome makes a mockery of their desire. It seems like an unfitting place to announce that you are the Jewish Messiah – like going to Washington, DC to be presented as a new Amish Bishop.

But more than all of that, Jesus presents his announcement of crucifixion not as something extraordinary; he says it is the normal path for all disciples who want to come with him.

At this point we can no longer be outside observers. We, too, are being clearly told that the way of Christ is to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow. “For 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.”

Now there are people who respond to this by trying to find the nearest handy cross and take it on – “I’m going to sell everything to buy Bibles and smuggle them into North Korea.” Other folks will describe some ordinary hardship as their burden: “My teen-ager’s stubbornness is just my cross to bear.”

But this is not what Jesus is teaching. We don’t get to choose our cross. It chooses us, when we take the step he puts first: denying ourselves. This is probably the harder part for us,

because self-denial is not a major teaching of 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture.

Self-denial does not mean giving up a little pleasure here, a bit of enjoyment there. Nor does it mean choosing a life of total ascetic discipline, like a desert hermit. Instead, self-denial requires separation from the message for sale in the world around us, about what actually is worthwhile or important.

Years ago Ivy and I spent a winter weekend at a resort in Pennsylvania. The decision to do this was based on a somewhat whimsical desire to find an old lodge, maybe like a big log cabin, with cross-country ski trails, cozy armchairs beside a stone fireplace, and country home cooking. Maybe we were looking for a Bing Crosby movie.

But this was before Google, and we had no idea how to find such a thing. So instead, we managed to stumble into a very modern place with ultra-fancy décor and expensive entertainment: one could shop for high-end clothing or jewelry, see nightclub acts or first-run movies, eat gourmet meals, have babysitting for the children – kind of like an ocean cruise run aground. Not what we were hoping for.

On top of that, somebody's twelve-year-old kid was walking around with a fancy hand-held movie camera, shooting film of everyone there, in all that ambience, to demonstrate what he kept calling "the good life". We disagreed with his definition of "good" and left before the weekend was over.

Whatever the 'good life' truly is, it probably has less to do with up-scale shopping and more to do with Jesus' call to deny ourselves. But you can't find a good definition for that in Google either. So let's try this. What if self-denial is largely a matter of what is in the center of our vision. We wouldn't be focused on our place in the world of Vogue magazine (or a Bing Crosby movie). We wouldn't be thinking about how to fulfill our day-dreams of success, acquisition and security.

In fact, the point is that we wouldn't be looking at ourselves at all. In the center of our line of sight would be Jesus: suffering, crucified and risen. We would be looking at the one who came to free us from the pseudo-good life. We would be focused, through him, on relationships that lead to community, service and compassion.

When Christ fills our vision, we don't need to worry about which cross we are called to bear. It will be shown to us. We will also see, in that central line of sight, a life that brings us not to mere passing pleasures, but to actual joy and deep purpose. We will be led to the place where we can be most alive, most truly the persons God created us to be. Those who lose their lives as the center of their lives will gain their true life. This is both the promise and its fulfillment.