

Daniel 7:13-14

Mark 8:27 - 9:1

March 12, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Journey to the Cross
THE CENTER OF THE GOSPEL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

How many of you watched the 2016 summer Olympics from Rio de Janeiro? If you did, at some point in those seventeen days of coverage, you probably saw the statue of Cristo Redentor, “Christ the Redeemer.” 2,300 feet above Rio on top of Corcovado Mountain, the 125 foot tall concrete statue stands with its arms stretched wide to 92 feet. Christ the Redeemer has become a symbol, if not **the** symbol of Rio de Janeiro. Visit www.riodejaneiro.com to plan your next trip, and you’ll see Christ’s head and outstretched left arm at the top of the page.

Who do people say that Cristo Redentor is? Some say the statue is a tribute to Catholicism. Some say Christ the Redeemer is a spirited attack against creeping secularism. Some say the huge statue one-half mile above Rio is a general symbol of welcome. Padre Omar, the rector of the chapel in the statue’s base, says, “It’s a religious symbol, a cultural symbol, and a symbol of Brazil. Christ the Redeemer brings a marvelous vista of welcoming arms to all those who pass through the city of Rio de Janeiro.”¹

In his homily at Ralph Guglielmi’s funeral mass at the Transfiguration Catholic Church, Deacon Mike Vandiver called our attention to the crucifix on the sanctuary wall behind the altar. A crucifix, of course, is a cross with an image of Jesus Christ on it. Mike commented on Christ’s arms stretched out in welcome. This morning I’m going to use a prayer from the *Book of Common Worship* after my sermon. The first part of the prayer says, “Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace . . .” Protestant churches typically have empty crosses, primarily for theological reasons, especially having to do with the joy and promise of the resurrection.

If you can, however, try to picture Jesus hanging on the cross, and you might begin to get a sense of how Peter felt that day in the area of Caesarea Philippi. In last week’s sermon, we heard Peter’s Pentecost sermon, which he ended by boldly and emphatically proclaiming, “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Again today, Peter is in the spotlight. As they walked along the road, Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Their answers were as varied as peoples’ reactions to the Cristo Redentor high above Rio: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. Then Jesus asked them (and it really is a question for all twelve disciples), “Who do **y’all** say that I am?” Peter answered correctly, and he is portrayed as answering for all of the disciples, “You are the Messiah.” Then comes verse 8:31: “Then

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 again.”

This story about Peter’s confession of faith and Jesus’ foretelling of his death and resurrection is the center of the gospel — literally! The story comes at the end of the 8th chapter, exactly halfway through the 16 chapter gospel. There are 323 verses in the first eight chapters, 342 verses in the last eight chapters. But the story is the center of the gospel in a much more profound, theological way.

Two weeks ago, I talked in my sermon about using the historical-critical method to study and interpret the scriptures. Another method is called “narrative criticism,” which focuses on the literary shape of the Bible story. In other words, narrative criticism helps the reader understand the story by looking at such things as plot, character development, the narrator, the point of view of the characters, and irony, among others. Narrative criticism is not just for Bible stories, however. Any story can be studied and understood this way.

You know that a good story has some kind of twist or turning point, typically called the “crisis.” This “crisis” is described as “a significant turning point in the story that determines how it must end. These story events involve something new and significant. They’re story events that directly affect the *whole* story, not just the next scene. Unless that ‘something’ will have direct repercussions for the rest of the story — to the point that there’s no turning back for the characters without major consequences — the scene’s choice or dilemma isn’t a turning point.”²

Not only is this story about Peter and Jesus and discipleship literally at the center of Mark’s gospel, along with the very next story about Jesus’ Transfiguration on the mountain, it is the *theological* center of Mark’s gospel. This is a watershed event, a crucial dividing line in Mark’s story.

One writer has said the easiest way to understand the plot of a story is to think about climbing a mountain. As you start up one side of the mountain in the story, you are introduced to the characters, where the story takes place, and the main conflicts. As you make your way up the mountain of the story, the conflicts start to build along the way. When you reach the top of the mountain, you reach the turning point of the story. “You have reached the top of the mountain and you cannot go any further, you have to turn and go down. This point in the story is when things finally start to move in a different direction and it may not always be a positive direction.” As you head back down the mountain, events in the story start to work out. When you reach the bottom of the mountain, the story’s events are resolved, but, as the writer puts it, “The solution might not be what you want, but the conflict has been resolved.”³

Here we are at the center of the gospel, and Jesus and Peter and James and John are going to go up the mountain six days later. As they prepare to climb that mountain, the conflicts are heating up and Jesus tells them he is headed to Jerusalem to be handed over, to suffer, to die, and to rise again. From this point on in Mark’s gospel, the dominant theme that controls everything is the coming suffering of Jesus in Jerusalem. Remember how the “crisis” affects the *whole* story, not just the next scene? When you

come to the cross at the center of the gospel, you have to look back at everything Jesus has said and done and see it and hear it in light of his coming suffering in Jerusalem. You also have to look ahead and prepare yourself for what's about to happen.

But even if the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the resolution to the conflicts, they might not be exactly what you were expecting or wanting, especially the cross. Apparently Peter wasn't too excited about the prospect of Jesus suffering at the hands of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. He took Jesus aside and rebuked him — actually, scolded him as a parent might scold a child.

That's when we hear that famous line from Jesus, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus is facing the same temptation right there in the area of Caesarea Philippi that he faced in the wilderness when he was tempted by the devil. In essence, Peter was telling Jesus, "Quit talking about suffering and dying! Save yourself!" (and, by extension, save us at the same time!) Peter tempted Jesus to be something other than the kind of Messiah he was "destined" to be. And Peter and the other disciples just don't get it. Actually, they **can't** get it, because they haven't see the full extent of Jesus' suffering and dying on the cross, nor have they heard the good news of the resurrection.

In Mark's gospel, unless you are willing to accept Jesus as the suffering Son of Man, the suffering Messiah who died on the cross, you won't get it. The same is true for us. We have empty crosses in our Presbyterian church, as most Protestant churches do. We look at the empty cross at the front of the sanctuary and we remember the joy and the promise and the hope of the resurrection from the dead. But we have to remember that the cross is empty only because it once held the body of our crucified Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As someone has said, "To confess Jesus as Messiah is to recognize his dying body on the cross, and to recognize that discipleship is the way of our own cross."⁴

Even though we have the empty cross in our sanctuary, even though we know the end of the story, even though we know that "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified," how much are we like Peter? We take Jesus aside and we scold him because we don't want to or can't accept his suffering and death on the cross. Worship him? Oh, yes! Praise him? Of course! Do good works in his name? Absolutely! Pick up my cross daily and follow him? Wait a minute, Jesus, let's talk about that. Or, to be perfectly honest, I'd rather **not** talk about that . . .

We may never face persecution because of our faith to the extent of being nailed to a cross. But how many times do we leave the cross lying on the ground and, as a result, end up trying to save our own lives or being ashamed of Jesus and his words in our generation? How many times do we deny the suffering Jesus Christ who calls us to follow him, when we don't speak up and don't act out and don't walk the walk, because we're afraid? Afraid to lose face, to lose status? Afraid to rock the boat, afraid to make waves, afraid to challenge "the ways things are and the ways things have always been"? How often are we satisfied to pay lip service to Jesus as Lord and Messiah without heeding his call to pick up our cross and follow him?

In his Christian classic, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes a series of letters from Uncle Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood. Screwtape is one of the devil's

minions, and he gives advice to Wormwood about the best ways to keep people from living fully and faithfully in relationship with God (whom Screwtape calls “The Enemy”). In his 13th letter to his nephew, Screwtape counsels, “Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will . . . Active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel.”

In his pastoral comments about this story of Peter and Jesus and Jesus’ coming death, Paul C. Shupe writes, “In these forty days we may contemplate not only the wonderful power of the cross of Christ, but the power inherent in taking up our own crosses too. Opportunities are daily before us, times when we may give our lives sacrificially to acts of love, compassion, justice, and peace, even in the face of the same imperial forces of sin and death that confronted Jesus. In this season, we are wise to ponder, not only the cross or crucifix in our sanctuaries, but the picture of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, calling all his disciples to take up our own crosses and to walk with him in paths of love and service.”⁵

At the center of the gospel is the cross of Jesus Christ. At the center of the gospel Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” At the center of the gospel Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

How will we answer Jesus? More than that, will we answer Jesus, not just with words, but with our very lives and actions? Earlier I read the first part of the prayer I will pray in just a minute, about Jesus’ outstretched arms on the cross. Here is the rest of that prayer: “So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth with our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you. Amen.”

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Michelle Boorstein, “Open arms: The many meanings of Rio’s massive Christ statue,” The Washington Post, August 20, 2016 at www.columbiatribune.com.

²Two sources: “Literary Analysis: Using Elements of Literature,” at www.roanestate.edu and Jami Gold, “What Makes a Story Event a ‘Turning Point’?” at www.jamigold.com.

³“Plot and the Plot Diagram,” at www.edtech2.boisestate.edu.

⁴Joseph D. Small, Mark 8:31-38, “Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 72.

⁵Paul C. Shupe, Mark 8:31-38, “Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 72.