

## Epiphany 5B 2021 Sermon

### *Mark 1:29-39*

*After Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

*That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

In last week's Gospel, Jesus encountered a man with an unclean spirit, and the spirit said to Jesus, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." (Mark 1:24) In *this* week's Gospel, which follows *immediately* upon last week's, Jesus does not allow the demons to speak at all, because they know him. It is the first instance of many in Mark's Gospel where Jesus tries to keep his Messianic identity secret. In the verses immediately *following* today's Gospel, Jesus will cleanse a leper, and then will sternly warn the leper not to tell anyone who it was that healed him.

Bible scholars call this recurring theme in Mark's Gospel, "the Messianic Secret." Why would Jesus **not** want people to know he was the Messiah? I think that one reason is because Jesus knew that the people would inevitably have the wrong idea of the Messiah's true purpose, mission, and methods. Jews in Jesus' day thought the Messiah would come as a military conqueror and overthrow the Romans who occupied the land of Israel and oppressed the people. And after conquering the Romans in battle, the Messiah would take his place on the throne of his ancestor, the warrior King David.

But this understanding of the Messiah of God could not be more wrong; and so, Jesus tells people (and demons!) to keep silent about the fact that he is the Messiah. And it's a good thing, since not even Jesus' closest disciples, who **do** know that he is the Messiah, really understand what that means.

Three times in Mark's Gospel,<sup>1</sup> Jesus will tell his disciples that he **must** undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, be rejected, mocked, spat upon, tortured, and killed. And yet, not **once** do they comprehend the meaning of his words. In fact, after the **first** time Jesus tells his disciples of the necessity of his suffering and death, we are told, "Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him." (Mark 8:32, CEB) But Jesus turns and

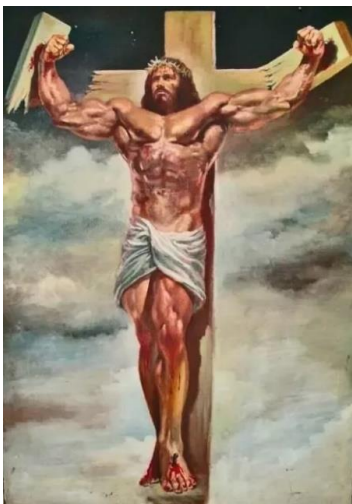
rebukes Peter, saying, “Get behind me, **Satan!** For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Mark 8:33, NRSV)

Setting one’s mind on *human* things means, to begin with, not allowing the elders, chief priests, and scribes to win. Not *submitting* to suffering and death.

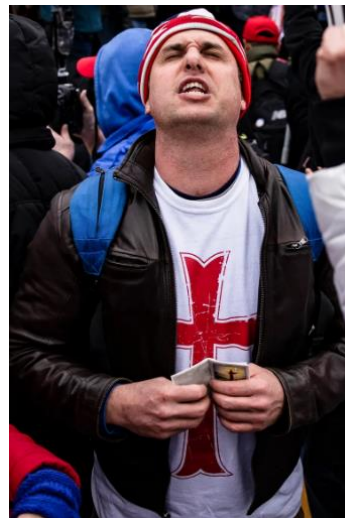
When Jesus predicts that Peter will disavow him 3 times, Peter vehemently denies that that could ever happen, saying to Jesus, “Even if I have to **die** with you, I will never deny you!” (Mark 14:31, NLT2) Peter sees himself as strong and loyal and unwavering. And yet, after Jesus is arrested, Peter does, indeed, deny knowing Jesus three times. Why? I imagine it’s because Peter, when threatened with his **own** suffering and death, is afraid, and wants to avoid it at all costs.

Now, in a way, if you think about it, Peter’s denial is true: Peter *doesn’t* know Jesus; not in the depths of his being. He doesn’t know what being the Messiah is truly about. He “knows” Jesus on the surface, of course: he’s spent a lot of time with him. But I would suggest that Peter and others who recognize Jesus as the Messiah (including the demons!), do so because of the amazing miracles he performs. John Shea calls this the “razzle-dazzle,” and notes that “when miracle working does *not* happen or cannot happen (Mark 6:5), the popularity of Jesus will fade as quickly as it appeared.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ popularity depends largely on what today we might call “the WOW factor.” And it all ties in with the people’s belief that the Messiah will come with power and strength to conquer their enemies.

And, my friends, this belief in the power of a conquering Jesus is still alive and well today. Some Christians recruit Jesus to battle their enemies, like this man at the Jan. 6 Capitol Building insurrection who wears a crusader cross. His fight against his political enemies is a holy war. (An oxymoron, to be sure.) The movement for a “[muscular Christianity](#),”<sup>3</sup> which began in the



middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in England, is still alive and well today. The incongruity of it all is nowhere more evident than in this image, popular in some Christian groups, of an Arnold Schwarzenegger Jesus who, rather than *submitting* to the cross (which would make him seem weak), *destroys* the cross by his muscular power.



In the mindset of “muscular Christianity”, compassion and forgiveness are seen as signs of weakness; vindictiveness a sign of power and strength. Participating in the community of nations and the community of the world’s religions is seen as a sign of weakness; looking out only for *my* country and *my* religion is seen as a sign of strength. Welcoming refugees into our country is seen as a sign of weakness; building walls to keep them out, a sign of strength. I could go on, but my point is that in each of these instances, what “muscular Christianity” sees as weakness is exactly what Jesus and St. Paul see as the power of God.

St. Paul spends a good amount of time on this subject when he writes to the Corinthians, who saw themselves as wiser and more sophisticated than most of the rest of the world. “[T]he message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” Paul writes, “but to us who are being made whole it is the power of God... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ... we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. ...God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong... Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (1 Corinthians 1:18-31; 2 Corinthians 12:10) And our psalmist today echoes that same theme when he writes: “[God] is not impressed by the might of a horse; he has no pleasure in the strength of a man...” (Psalm 147:11, BCP)

Evangelical author and Bible teacher Beth Moore, writing about the “muscular Christianity” on display at the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol insurrection, said, “I don’t know the Jesus some have paraded and waved around in the middle of this treachery today. They may be acting in the name of some other Jesus, but that’s not the Jesus of the Gospels.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the signs that was prominent in the crowd storming the Capitol that day was a sign that read, “Jesus saves.” Unfortunately, all too often when people hold signs like this, what they are trying to do is to get you think the way they do. “If you believe such-and-such about Jesus, you will be saved; if not, you will be damned to hell.” But if you have listened to me preach or teach for any length of time, you know that the New Testament word translated “save” can also be translated “heal” or “make whole.” And **that** is what Jesus was all about when he healed the people or cast out “demons” from them, as in today’s Gospel. It was not about miraculously breaking natural laws, and therefore “wowing” people with Jesus’ supernatural powers. No. The healings were signs that God’s kingdom was breaking into the midst of this mixed-up and sinful world. We see this clearly in today’s Gospel, where we are told that the people “brought to [Jesus] **all** who were sick or possessed with demons... And he cured *many*...” Not all. And the next morning when, after Jesus has prayed, his disciples hunt him down, they say to him, “**Everyone** is searching for you.” More miracles to

perform! But Jesus says, “No.” “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for **that** is what I came out to do.” And what is this “message”? It is the very first thing Jesus says in Mark’s Gospel: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” (Mark 1:15)

Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news! And, the Gospels show us that this “good news” includes Jesus’ own suffering and death, and his call to us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. (Mark 8:34-36) This “Good news” includes our forgiving 70 times 7, turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile (Matthew 5-7), being a neighbor to someone who is from a hated class of people (Luke 10:25-37), treating others as Christ (Matthew 25:31-46).

“He cured many.” Not all of those who were brought to Jesus were cured. But physically curing people was not Jesus’ main focus. St. Paul, after all, suffered from a “thorn in the flesh” and prayed that God take it from him; but God refused, saying, “My grace is sufficient.” Paul was not cured; but his faith healed him, made him whole, brought him under the jurisdiction of the kingdom of God. And he carried on Jesus’ ministry: Proclaiming the Good News that the Kingdom is here, calling people to change their hearts and lives and trust the good news, and restoring people to wholeness.

And you and I, my friends, are being called, in our own, small way, to do the same.

AMEN

1 [Mark 8:31; 9:30-31; 10:33-34](#)

2 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 53-54

3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muscular\\_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muscular_Christianity)

4 <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/07/954581163/faith-leaders-nearly-unanimous-in-condemning-assault-on-capitol#:~:text=Christian%20nationalism%20was%20one%20of%20the%20underlying%20themes,an%20%22unholy%20amalgamation%20of%20White%20supremacy%20and%20Christianity.%22>