

Sermon – Mark 8:27-38; Isaiah 50:4-9; James 3:1-12  
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“Sticks and Stones”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It was all anyone could talk about, although it was hard to find the words at first. Like most of you, I remember where I was 20 years ago when four commercial flights were hijacked and transformed into weapons of hate. A classmate knocked on my dorm room door sometime between 7:46 and 8:03 Central, in between the first tower and the second being hit. I remember the time because I was still sleeping for the first but was awake to see the second happen in real time. I remember huddling with others around tv screens throughout the day; gathering in the seminary chapel to weep and pray and lament; talking with friends in quiet tones about what it all meant. My classmates and I were in our last year of seminary, filled with theological knowledge and insight, ready to go into parish ministry to preach the Word. But even though the attacks were all we could talk about, words failed us. Suddenly, the future seemed less secure. Would there be more attacks? In what sort of world were we now living? We found ourselves in a time of national disaster and calamity, and the future was a fearful place. What words could we speak in the face of such senseless suffering and loss, such rampant pain and death?
2. It was all anyone could talk about, but no one seemed to have quite the right words to describe who he was or what was taking place. As he walked with his disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi, he walked through a region that

had been caught up in his story. It's hard to ignore a sudden spate of healings and exorcisms, after all. The authorities were even getting a bit worried. Who was he? John the Baptist? Elijah? Jesus turns and asks the disciples what they think. Peter answers: You are the Messiah. The Messiah; God's anointed. The One chosen and sent to redeem Israel from their ongoing national disaster. Peter says the right words in this moment but has no idea what they mean. So, Jesus tells him: The Son of Man, like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy, must suffer. He will be rejected. Killed. And after three days, raised. But Peter has stopped listening by this point, and likely doesn't hear the final note about resurrection. Peter gets stuck on suffering and death. Why would Jesus go toward suffering and death? What kind of Messiah is he? This makes no sense. Peter's future clouds with fear, and Peter takes it upon himself to rebuke his teacher.

3. But Jesus rebukes Peter, and the words sting: "Get behind me, Satan." Why the stern rejoinder? Well, simply put, words matter, and this is never truer than when it comes to Jesus, the Word of God. In an epistle written several decades later, James takes up the power of the tongue, this little rudder that can run a ship aground; this small flame that can burn down a forest. Children's rhymes about sticks and stones notwithstanding, we know the negative power of words, especially spoken in gossip or slander, insult or hate. Sticks and stones are usually picked up because we have become inflamed by words, our own or someone else's. Verbal violence begets physical violence. Our tongues, however, as James reminds us, were given to us that we would bless and praise God, not damage one another. In speaking of God, truth matters. And the truth of the matter is that Jesus has come not simply to save Israel but the whole creation, and that he does so not by fleeing from suffering and death, but by taking up his cross in the midst of their awful power. Peter may have had the best of intentions, but it is devilish to stand in Jesus' way, for it is the way of salvation. It is the way of the cross,

for only through the death of the Son of Man can life be restored in this broken world.

4. The way of the cross for Jesus becomes the way of discipleship for us. If we would follow, we are called to take up our cross and fall in behind him. Note, first, that we are called to take up *our* cross, not Jesus'. It is for him, and him alone, to suffer for sin and die to save and redeem. That work is now finished, as proclaimed by Christ himself with his dying breath. In his death and resurrection, we have been gifted with new life and the promise of the Father's future glory with the angels. But in this world, in this life, we bear the cross, that same sign in which our baptism was sealed. One never quite knows, perhaps, how the call to cruciform living will manifest itself in our lives. Surely, James's call to us to do the good work of clothing and feeding the needy, to eschew evil speech and use our words instead to praise and bless, helps us understand the task in front of us. But discipleship begins and ends simply with following Jesus. By getting out of his way and getting out of the business of trying to tell God what to do. By fixing our eyes on Christ and seeing where he leads us.
  
5. You recall, perhaps, the story of Father Mychal Judge, the Franciscan friar and New York Fire Department chaplain. His ministry blessed those at the margins: the hungry and homeless; those suffering addiction or living with AIDS; the sick and the grieving. On a Tuesday morning 20 years ago, Father Judge learned of the horrific attack on the World Trade Center and rushed to Ground Zero. He took up a position in the emergency command center in the North Tower, offering assistance and prayer for the injured and his fellow first responders. When the South Tower collapsed, debris went flying through the North Tower lobby, killing Father Judge. He was one of 343 firefighters who died that day, faithful servants whose cruciform vocation took them directly into suffering and death in the hope that others would be saved. While he lived, Father Judge prayed this prayer daily: "Lord, take me

where you want me to go; Let me meet who you want me to meet; Tell me what you want me to say; And keep me out of your way.” This is a prayer of cross-bearing discipleship; keep me out of your way, Lord, that you may lead and that I may follow. Father Judge was the first certified fatality of that horrible day, and so bears the designation of Victim 0001. At his funeral, Father Michael Duffy’s homily included these words: “We will bury Mychal Judge’s body, but not his spirit. We will bury his mind, but not his dreams. We will bury his voice, but not his message. We will bury his hands, but not his good works. We will bury his heart, but not his love. Never his love.” Indeed. When we follow the One whose path leads to death and resurrection, we can enter into the suffering of others without fear for the future, for the future belongs to the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

6. What, then, shall we say? In this world where sin and suffering so often seem to have their way, let us keep our eyes on Jesus. In him, we are already forgiven. In him, we already live in the promise of eternal life. In him, though we lose everything, we receive all we need for this world and the next. In Christ, let us find our voice, speaking comfort and hope to those who grieve, and peace and goodwill to those who continue to believe that violence is the solution. Jesus gave himself up to violence and death, but God raised him from the dead, vindicating the way of a peace that surpasses, the way of a love that bears and believes, hopes and endures all things. Live in this love, church, and work for this peace. Let us follow. Let us take up the cross as our rudder, getting out of Jesus’ way as he leads how and where we need to go, knowing we have nothing to fear. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.