

Ann Bonner-Stewart

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Newton MA

Proper 19B: Mark 8:27-38

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In 2016, the four of us Bonner-Stewarts went to Disney World for spring break. On our first day, we went to the Hollywood Studios section of the park. Our older daughter was tall enough to ride nearly everything, and we decided to go on the Rock n Roller coaster together. Here is how Disney describes this rollercoaster: "Race along the darkened freeways of Los Angeles in a super-stretch limo to the rockin' tunes of Aerosmith." She was excited. I was excited. I have the selfie to prove it. Unfortunately, way, way less than halfway through, she started asking to get off the roller coaster, which was problematic since, as you know, roller coasters stop for no one. I thought she knew what she was signing up for. She thought she knew what she was signing up for. Mistakes were made. And once we were on it, momentum just did its thing

Like a rollercoaster, Jesus' ministry has also been gaining momentum. As we've been reading through Mark, the crowds keep growing. There's healing upon healing upon healing. There's not one but two feedings of the thousands, which the original audience would have recognized as a traditional cue of the Messiah. Jesus is said to have walked on water, and control over water is something closely associated with YHWH. There have definitely been clashes with various religious authorities, which doesn't bode particularly well for him, but, honestly? Those run-ins are probably helping his popularity, because that's good gossip, y'all.

This momentum is getting unwieldy in some respects. A trend I've been pointing out nearly every Sunday is that Jesus can't get a moment's peace no matter what he does, no matter where he goes. In Mark 1, Jesus can already "no longer go into town opening, as people came to him from every quarter" (v.45). In Mark 3, in Nazareth, Jesus' hometown "the crowd came together so that they could not even

eat” (v.21). When Jesus disembarks after crossing the sea, great crowds gather and press in on him (v. 24). In Mark 6, the disciples and Jesus try to go away and rest for awhile, “for many were coming and going, and they had no leisure to even eat, but many saw them going and hurried there on foot to arrive ahead of them” (v.31-32). Last week, in Mark 7, he went to a Gentile region, trying to keep anyone from knowing about his presence, yet in v. 24 “he could not escape notice.” At this point, Mark 8, exactly halfway through Mark’s Gospel, one of the biggest stated problems—until now— was like those faced by Nirvana in the 90s and Chappel Roan right now— they got really popular quite suddenly, and the proverbial venues are too small. Miracle after miracle, healing after healing. Teaching about considering reinterpreting the law. Jesus is not unlike a rock star here.

Perhaps Jesus realizes that he has possibly not been getting through in the way he wanted to, that **enthusiasm is not the same as understanding**. So he asks, “Who do people think I am?” Elijah, a prophet, John the baptizer— all pretty big deals. And then Jesus asks who do you say I am? Peter answers, whether for them all or just for himself, it’s unclear, “You are the Messiah.”

Now Peter’s answer turns out to be both right on the nose and totally wrong at the same time. But Jesus knows they are saying the same word and yet meaning something totally different. Think of it like this. Imagine I said hey let’s go on vacation together. And we do. But then your idea of “vacation” is sitting outside somewhere, maybe with a book, maybe not, sipping drinks all day long, and my idea of vacation is hiking, and paddle boarding, and kayaking. Same term, different understandings.

Though it’s only really clear in retrospect, this passage, the Gospel we have for today, represents a turning point to all that completely unbridled enthusiasm. Mark 8 is the first, though not the last, time that the disciples get an insight into what they have signed up for— and it is not at all what they thought it was. It is the Rock and Roller coaster. Today, in Mark 8, Jesus tells them, and not for the last time, that he is not here to answer their prayers in the way they most likely anticipated. It’s probably not a mistake or throwaway. Casesari Phillipi is a city named for the

Roman emperor. One of the primary things that makes this Gospel so hard to crack is that it's hard for us to remember the disciples actually did not know what they had signed up for, so hard to remember that this is a turning point is because of its familiarity. We have incredibly similar versions in Matthew and Luke that we hear on Sundays.

It's kind of impossible to go through life without thinking this isn't what I signed up for. Sometimes it's as easy to fix as not getting on a roller coaster again if you're my daughter, or not watching horror movies if you're me, but I don't have to tell you that most of the time it's not. A routine surgery or test that ends up being less so. A class that you thought you were ready for or wanted and yet it's sucking your will to live. A job that ends up being way more of the other duties as assigned than we thought. Good ol' fashioned midlife crisis and where you realize you are basically living in Groundhog's Day. Sometimes it's not quite so big but if enough of them happen, it can be soul-sucking. Called to rehearsal, traveling there during Boston's lovely traffic, waiting, and then told you didn't need to even be there. It's a big ol' fat reminder that we are not in control in the way we would like, and that is scary, because we often think we are alone and that it is all up to us.

What if our "this"—whatever your "this" is right now—, maybe your most recently thought "this" is not what I signed up for— certain aspects of school, of aging, of marriage, of diagnosis, of family, of your job, — what if this not being what we signed for does not mean we have gone astray or that we have been abandoned? What if it's a call to us to reconsider our dearly held beliefs, or maybe to question our assumptions we don't even know we have? What if, like Peter, we have the word right and the meaning wrong? How might that change our understanding of what might be happening when something happens that we didn't sign up for? What might it feel like to know that this isn't we signed up for is a part of the experience of discipleship and just being a human living on this planet? A little more relieved? Slightly more calm? A bit less mad? Where might some of that emotional energy of this isn't what I signed up for go if we are not fighting it tooth and nail or just giving up when it inevitably happens? Though it's not what he signed up for— at all, really— Peter got more. Not immediately, right. Our unimagined outcome is not always worse, though I guarantee you Peter thought it

was on Good Friday. What if when we realize this isn't what we signed up for, that it's an invitation to broaden our vision and to wonder? That's a big ask, ya'll, but Jesus is in the habit of big asks, because he believes we possess the capacity to be different somehow.

What if it's not always a bad thing that this isn't what we signed up for? Amen.