

# GOSPEL OF RISK - RISKING YOUR SOUL

## Ordinary Time

Mark 8:27-37

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Amy Roon  
University Congregational Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington 98125  
August 28, 2016

Scripture:

**Mark 8:27-3<sup>1</sup>**

Jesus and his disciples headed out for the villages around Caesarea Philippi. As they walked, he asked, "Who do the people say I am?" "Some say 'John the Baptizer,' they said. "Others say 'Elijah.' Still others say 'one of the prophets.'" He then asked, "And you what are you saying about me? Who am I?" Peter gave the answer: "You are the Christ, the Messiah." Jesus warned them to keep it quiet, not to breathe a word of it to anyone.

He then began explaining things to them: "It is necessary that the Son of Humankind proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religious scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive." He said this simply and clearly so they couldn't miss it. But Peter grabbed him in protest. Turning and seeing his disciples wavering, wondering what to believe, Jesus confronted Peter. "Peter, get out of my way! Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works."

Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat. *I* am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is *the* way, my way to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

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Pastor Amy Roon

Prayer

God:

Be in our hearts. Be in our minds. Be in our understanding.  
Be in the words spoken and the words heard.  
Be in the words lived out in the world. Amen.

We could be talking about the Gospel of Mark -- renamed the Gospel of Risk -- for many reasons. The community that heard and told this gospel felt a sense of urgency about the story. Everything, if you read the whole thing through you'll see -- everything happens "Suddenly" and "Just then!" And there's little finesse to the narrative, leaving the overall effect of, "Come on! Let's go!" But we read the Scriptures in tiny chunks on Sunday, so sometimes I think this comes across more as "Here's this thing, and another thing, and another thing, and another. Word of God. Amen." And the effect of a little more "Say, what?"

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<sup>1</sup> The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language. Translated by Eugene H. Peterson, ©2002.

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Eugene Peterson tried to translate the Bible into more informal conversational language, and we used his translation this morning. I'm still finding the need to break down some pieces here.

When our morning Scripture begins, Jesus is questioning his disciples, which is a way that the community of Mark can open up a dialogue asking itself and each other, "What do you believe?" "Who you following?" "Who are people saying that I am?" That underlying question: who are you following, what about Jesus is most important to you? They answer "John the Baptist," *knowing* -- the community of Mark knew -- that John the Baptist had been murdered by Herod, basically because Herod did not protect him from the people who wanted him dead. And that some believed that he had come back from the dead leaving Herod frightened for his soul.

So, what if we heard today "Who is it that you say that I am?" Some say, "Martin Luther King Jr.," knowing that the Reverend Doctor was assassinated for calling us to repentance and reconciliation, *knowing* that our government was *deeply* conflicted about his living teaching, *knowing* that the work of healing this nation from racism *frightens* the powers that be for their very souls.

They answer, "Some say you are Elijah," knowing that Elijah is a *known* prophet, an historical figure who spoke truth to power, a figure of historical justice significance but not a political position. Perhaps we could hear some say, "He is Sojourner Truth," knowing that, while she could never hold a political position, her influence on history on the story of our justice lives cannot be denied. They answer, "Some say that you are one of the prophets," knowing that this is a general term of the day and occupation of sorts.

And what if we heard, "Some say you are self-help guru," knowing that this puts Jesus and a general category of folks who say things that may be very useful, if not historically or politically significant.

But when Jesus asks them, "Who do *you* say ..." -- not everybody else -- "who do *you* say that I am?" He gets an answer from Peter, the rock of the church, saying, "You are *Christ* the Messiah."

And we should hear, "You, Jesus, are the next leader of the Free World," because we should remember that "the Messiah" is not a personal Lord and Savior. The Messiah is a political figure who will overturn the current world order. *The Messiah is your ideal presidential candidate.*

And Jesus says, "Well, DON'T tell anybody *THAT!* I have *WORK* to do before they kill me!"

Make no mistake! Holy work does not evade suffering. Holy work will get you questioned and threatened by *all* institutional powers: familiarly, academically, religiously, and politically. The Powers That Be will have you killed rather than be transformed. And Peter, his campaign manager, says, "Don't say that! How we going to get any decent campaign donations if you keep insisting on suffering and death?" And Jesus calls them out do not tempt me or any of my followers with the idea that changing the world won't mean changing themselves. Don't suggest we can do right individually and not act politically. Do not attempt to anesthetize my message. My message is meant to wake people up to the suffering in the world. Don't suggest that that isn't going to hurt. Doing the work of justice may free your soul -- and that is in it celebrating business, but it doesn't have a thing to do with avoiding pain."

And that's what's in the balance, isn't it? What is freeing your soul worth to you? Which is more important: our comfort or our souls? Because the love and justice that will free our souls will very

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likely cost us the comforts we now enjoy. For decades this Gospel of Risk -- this Gospel that invites us and demands and says, "Stand with pain, stand despite pain and suffering. Do not avoid it." This Gospel of Risk has been framed within a world of your individual soul and your *personal* relationship with Jesus, and your *personal* reality with goodness and blessing and wealth and happiness.

And, of all the election years to remember that the message of Jesus is not personal and that it is long past time that we tend to our collective soul, let us this year, pivot to Jesus the Messiah as a political act with political consequences. And political realities are never personal: these are shared realities that some have the privilege to ignore.

I have never been blacker or perceived racism so personally as I have since adopting my black son. Knowing that my task is to see my black son, my boy, grow into a black man of faith and integrity continually challenges my desire to fill his young life with comfort. It has brought some political realities *much* closer to home for me personally. The political reality that police brutality continues to be an accepted norm. ... No! ... In a democracy we must acknowledge that it is then in a voter-approved and -directed norm. It cannot be denied, and the cost is our collective soul, our personal salvations wrapped up in the consequence of our political actions. The Bible tells us so.

This past month walking into the unexpected while ... I can't say "The unexpected" ... I mean, I spent months and months preparing to be a foster parent and yet the realities surprised me. ... This past month I signed up for WIC<sup>2</sup>, something I should have at least tried to do, rather than know and talk, about a long time ago. But the resources to support the baby placed in my care are all found within the quagmire of social services. And the real world consequences of our political actions are felt *most* acutely on the poor and disenfranchised. *Inadequate, demoralizing, demeaning, and inaccessible* forms of basic food and housing support are the byproduct of our political action or inaction. We cannot perform acts of love and insure human decency for all and suggest our faith stay in the box of what feels good and right to us personally. The Bible tells us so.

What Jesus and his disciples in the community of Mark were naming was that they could not survive in the world as it is in the political realities that dictated the shape of their lives, and they wanted nothing more than it all to change. We're used to thinking of the risks we take as *individual* risks with *individual* consequences. But this is really a *modern* notion and it is a fallacy. There were individual acts. There were individual acts that placed Baby Dee in my care, but it is a collective society that ultimately cares for her.

It was never clearer to me than when, not only spending three frustrating hours just trying to find the office to get the vouchers to eventually take to the supermarket, and stand in an aisle and know that it any moment I can simply lay down the card that I'm a foster parent and get a blessing and a smile and thanks for using the social service. Trying to keep that off the table and see and witness to what it feels like and know what it feels like to go through the aisle and pay for something with that government check. And awkwardly and frustratingly know, as someone who then also did have a bunch of other groceries to buy including formula that was just as good and in the generic form costing half as much is the brand name I was required to buy. That if we were a society that trusted mothers to do everything they could to feed their children well could have given that same cash

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<sup>2</sup> Women, Infants, and Children [WIC] Nutrition PROGRAM. For more information see [www.doh.wa.gov>YouandYourFamily](http://www.doh.wa.gov>YouandYourFamily).

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amount to buy formula and allowed her and -- in this case me -- to buy twice as much formula as I was able to get. It was a personal reality and awareness of what a political vote naming for our legislators, for local officials to say what we value and how we should live as a society.

We're used to thinking that the risks we take as individuals have individual consequences; but following Jesus the Messiah is something we do in congregation. We come together as followers of the Jesus Way to change the very world we live in, not merely to survive in it. Your *passion*, your *engagement*, your *soul* matters here. Tell the world *who* do *you* say that Jesus is. Does Jesus only affect you personally? Or does just following Jesus change the political reality of our neighborhood, of our city, of our state, our nation, and of our world? How then shall we live into the grace of God given to us with the mandate never to sell yourself short and the grace to risk something big for the sake of something good? – Amen

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from [www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/10/05/2016](http://www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/10/05/2016); rev. 10/26/2016