

On the way...

Ottawa Mennonite Church

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Scripture: *Mark 8:31-38*

Since moving to Ottawa I have tried to become at least a little more active than my sedentary nature would have me be. In the summer I tried to bike to the office as often as I felt was practical, my season tended to be a lot shorter a season than others. In the winter I tried to skate on the canal as much as I had time for, which ended up being once every three weeks or so. Needless to say, my



sedentary nature had and still does have a very strong influence on me. But a couple weeks after moving here a friend of mine from my undergraduate years invited me to join him to do a little indoor rock climbing. Having gone once or twice while in high school, and remembering a fondness for climbing trees, rocks and other large stationary objects when younger I eagerly agreed to join him.

Since then my friend and I have tried to go climbing about once each week on a somewhat regular basis. I have found it to be a great way to let go of stress, climbing until my arms and legs won't let me go any further, and a good way to challenge the problem solving side of my brain. Something that I observed while climbing is that the goal is not always about getting to the top, sometimes the journey to the top is more important and significant, than being on top.

When I first started my goal was always how fast could I get to the top, which hand and food holds I used didn't matter, I just wanted to get to the top. Climbing the walls as fast as I could, finding the best holds and racing to the top without enjoying the process of getting there, was getting tiring, my climbing partner started to challenge me. He started to force me to follow paths, the holds might not be the best, they might not be the easiest routes, but the challenge is well worth it. In many indoor climbing gyms various routes are tagged with coloured tape. These correspond to hand and foot holds that are allowed, or legal. All other holds are out of bounds. So instead of making it to the top in any way possible, known as climbing freestyle, there is a route to be followed, a certain discipline one adheres to.

Often these planned out routes are better described as puzzles or problems to be solved. These routes are designed to test and challenge the climber. A variety of hand and foot holds are given, some which are wide for the whole foot, others where only a toe might fit, some where the entire hand can get a very solid grip, and others where only finger tips are possible. In these routes different techniques are required and tested, new skills must be learned and old ones must be recalled, and all the while the climber is trying to follow the path laid out before them. The path is laid out by someone more experienced by them, thus the climber is following in the footsteps of someone who knows the way, and the climber trusts that the way will eventually lead to the top. At times the route might look impossible, at others it might feel like a breeze. The climber knows that the way probably won't be easy, the

climber knows that they will be challenged, but the climber also knows that they reason they are attempting a particular route is because of what the route offers, the challenge, the lessons, the revelations, the growth, and the climber knows the joy of accomplishment when they do eventually reach the top.

Journeying

Sometimes our spiritual or faith journey is a lot like rock climbing. Sometimes it is very easy to see how to get from one place to the other, going along the way is simple and easy, and one moves quickly. Other times one doesn't know how tomorrow is going to shape up, because of everything else that needs to occur, a slower pace is required. Sometimes the journey just feels far too daunting, and you end up slipping and falling.

Journeying is a theme that is dominant in scripture. When imagining journeying we often think of the Israelites wandering in the desert, following the pillar of cloud and flame, they didn't know the way but they trusted God and followed Moses, most of the time at least. One might think of our mis-directed friend Jonah, as he journeyed in one direction, away from God, only to be re-directed by a large water mammal.

In the New Testament the image of journey evokes memories of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, his spiritual journey of preparation prior to the beginning of his ministry. Perhaps we imagine the travels, adventures, and sometimes misadventures of the apostle Paul, as he moved about the Mediterranean planting churches and preaching. We reflect on the journeys taken by the disciples when they are sent out to minister. One might begin to imagine the images of journeys told by Jesus in the parables, such as the prodigal son, who leaves home, and lives the high life until the money runs out then returns home, humbled. Or the shepherd who goes out to search for the lone lost sheep, leaving the rest of the flock behind, maybe we imagine the journey the widow took searching for that one lost coin.

However, when we break down the gospel to see it in such small bits, we sometimes miss the larger paths taken. Our New Testament scripture today illustrates two journeys, one taken on by Jesus, the other commissioned to us.

When looking at the gospel of Mark, the larger journey which Jesus is on is ultimately to Jerusalem; that is where the story will end. Many of the Gospel authors use this motif to move the plot along. In this passage Jesus begins his final walk to Jerusalem. Once he reaches Jerusalem, it will only be a short time before Jesus is arrested, tried, sentenced, and finally crucified, but as Mark reminds us constantly, that is not the end, because after three days, Jesus will rise from the dead. But right now we're not that worried about Jerusalem, it will arrive in its own time. Instead we are on the way with Jesus.

Mark is very preoccupied with the way (*hodos* in the Greek). Over the next two chapters the way will pop up a number of times, each time within the context of a teaching about discipleship. Jesus teaches in this passage, that the way is not an easy one. That the way is not comfortable, that the way is not a

cake walk. Jesus teaches that the way is going to be rough. The way is, at its core, about following Jesus, literally.

Many of us can remember teachers that we once have had; teachers who weren't afraid to practice what they preach; teachers who would walk the talk; teachers who spoke from experience and acted consistently with what they spoke about, their actions matched their words. Teachers like that are admired. In a way Jesus was that perfect teacher. Jesus leads the way, and all we have to do is follow, seems easy enough.

Jesus becomes the designer of the climbing route. Jesus lays out the holds and marks the legal ones. All seems well, but what we, and the disciples don't expect is the nature of the route. Ultimately this route, the way, will change us, it will transform us. Because Jesus is calling us move from human to divine, shifting our thinking from a human perspective, to seeing the world from Jesus' and God's point of view.

From Human to Divine

At the beginning of this passage Jesus is on the move from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. And along the way he asked his disciples who the people think he is. He gets responses of people thinking that he is John the Baptist, recently arrested. Others think he is the ancient prophet Elijah, who was carried to heaven in a flaming chariot. And still others claim that Jesus is another prophet sent by God. After hearing this Jesus asks the disciples, who they think he is. And without hesitation Peter pipes up (as is Peter's nature) and blurts out, on behalf of the rest of the group, that Jesus is the Messiah. Realizing that they say with their words that Jesus is the Messiah, but whether they know it or not is another story. Jesus then begins to teach the disciples what the Messiah really is all about.

The Jews had one idea of what their Messiah was going to look like. To the Jews the Messiah was going to come and ally all the peoples to his side, and then the Messiah would 'take the fields and make war and destroy great and populous nations. Following which, Jerusalem would be purified and renovated, not in the home and garden sense. Next the Jews would return, Palestine would become the centre of the world, and all would be subject to it. Finally there would be a new age of peace and goodness. These views were "violent, nationalistic, destructive, vengeful....They ended in the perfect reign of God, but they came to it through a bath of blood and a career of conquest."¹

Instead Jesus describes what the Messiah is really going to do, "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."² Clearly not what the disciples were expecting, and of course not what Peter was expecting, and he let Jesus know. We're not sure what he said to Jesus, one can speculate, but we do know what Jesus' response was, and what a response it was!

¹ Barclay, William, The Gospel of Mark, The Daily study Bible, (Toronto: G.R. Welch Co, 1975), Pg 193-199.

² Mark 8:31

Knowing that the Peter and the Disciples just don't quite get it yet, Jesus describes what it means to follow him. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."³

We hear Jesus saying, that if the Messiah must suffer so too must his followers.⁴ Mark's Gospel rules out a view of Christ built on a romanticized portrait of a tolerant Jesus who only helps, heals and welcomes. It reveals to us the danger inherent in following Christ. That it might just cost us our lives.

Up the Wall and on the Way...

And now we realize just how challenging this route is really going to be. We see that the hand holds at times are small; we see that the food holds could be angled. We notice that we might not always have the best grips. And we see that there is a very big chance of us falling. As followers what do we do?

We ensure that our climbing harness is on tight, that the ropes are in good shape, that our knots tying us in are proper, that we have someone on the other end pulling up the slack, and all that's left is to begin our ascent. It might look challenging, but we know that there is a way, it might be difficult, but we trust the rope, we trust the one who laid the route, we know that we will be transformed by this route, and we know that Jesus is on belay, making sure that there is no slack in our line, so that if we fall, we don't hit the ground.

And once all of this is checked all that's left is to step up, grab the first hold and start to climb. Are you ready?

Amen⁵

³ Mark 8:34-35

⁴ Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Preaching the Revised common lectionary, Year B, Vol. 2,(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pg 71.

⁵ Quotations of Scripture are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise noted.