



**“RECALCULATING ROUTE”**

**SCRIPTURE: MARK 8: 31-38**

**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

**Sunday, February 25, 2024, Lent #2**

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Mark 8:31-38**

8:31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, priests, religious officials and scholars, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

8:34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

8:35 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.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

The Word of the LORD

**Thanks be to God**

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They are two of the most dreaded words of the modern age: “recalculating route.”

That dreaded realization that you’ve either made a wrong turn, missed a turn, or even worse—your GPS is not working and you have no idea where you are or what to do.

It's like when the power goes out and you feel regret that you are so helpless without it. When the GPS stops working, there's a part of me that is embarrassed, ashamed that I didn't do my due diligence to get my bearings in a more reliable way and know the way without the GPS telling me. I know better!

I've read the scientific studies about how GPS changes our brains and makes us less able to find our way around and may even contribute to cognitive decline. I've heard the horrible stories of people blindly following their GPS into the ocean, off cliffs, and into the desert never to be heard from again.

Even though I know all that stuff, it's so easily available, so tempting to just let the GPS tell me the way again and again and again. To put my comings and goings on autopilot so I can just zone out for a while.

Our brains are made for navigation. Unlike worms and other animals with smaller brains who might just use one thing to find their way around like smell, mammals have complex brains—and we are adept at making spatial maps so that we can figure out alternative routes to places just from the many different parts of our brains that are activated and gathering data when we move around. It's ancient—and it's like any muscle. If it's harmed or we let it atrophy, it doesn't work as well as it could.

Lent is a GPS dead zone spiritually. The route can get recalculated over and over again, and it calls on the most elemental parts of our embodied existence to find our way. And by that, I mean the deepest truth of who we are—that we are made in the image of God, that we are instilled with God consciousness, with a spark of divinity within us. We are made for this world to be home, and we are made to create balance and right relationship with all that is.

We are made for all those things, but those elemental layers of our humanity atrophy, when we set our moral compass by the spiritual substitutes for our created goodness—those spiritual substitutes could also be called idols—the things that loom so large in our experience that is hard for them to not drive our behavior—you can think of a few.

I am thinking of things like capitalism, money, work, respectability. I am thinking of superiority, white ways are the right ways.

I am thinking of the inner compass being scrambled by trauma and the learned need to avoid shame at any cost.

I am thinking of white solidarity. I am thinking of transphobia and homophobia, and ableism and xenophobia.

Those are some big drivers of behavior in our culture—lots of it boils down to the ways we are assimilated into conformity and intellectualization and disembodied ways of being only partly alive, to the ways we have learned since we were little not to trust our inner desire to be creative, to be free, to be true to ourselves.

The gift of the lenten GPS dead zone is that it can awaken these neglected and sacred parts of how God made us. Being who you are is exactly what the world needs to be healed. And the less dependent we are on the auto-pilot that wants us to quiet that yearning, the more free we get to find our way home to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

Here's the thing though. That sounds really beautiful, right? But it's also really hard. And that's why some people don't want to do it. Laying down the GPSes that atrophy our true selves is painful, scary, disorienting, triggering, even embarrassing and shameful. It's not something a lot of people want us to do, because it throws them off the track they've settled into in their lives.

Jesus, take a wheel, sounds like a great solution! The thing is, Jesus contended with all these challenges, too. Have you seen the meme—White Jesus behind the wheel.

### **Put up Jesus meme**

**Stop asking Jesus to take the wheel, cars didn't exist 2000 years ago and he has no idea what he is doing.**

**And Jesus is saying "I don't know what any of this (BLEEP) is and I'm scared."**

### **Take meme down**

Jesus doesn't make the wilderness something we can just breeze through without the getting lost part, or without the need to awaken those parts of us that can find our way. Jesus is who we follow, but he doesn't give us a get out of wilderness free card. He didn't come so we could learn to be helpless and passive in our own healing journeys.

So imagine that we've been out in the wilderness for a while, and we happen upon Jesus and this passage from today is what he has to offer. Not quite the oasis of margaritas and lovely Hors d'Oeuvres we were hoping for, huh?

Great suffering, rejected by church people and church officials, his own close friends telling him he's demon possessed, having to call one of his friends out for shady behavior, lose

your life to find it, and then the real kicker at the end—Jesus says if you are ashamed of me and my teaching then I will be ashamed of you when all is said and done.

Jesus, why did you have to go and say something like that to us?? We're out here in the wilderness. Can't you just invite us into your lovely tent with LED string lighting and a full buffet with an open bar and tell us everything is going to be ok?

No wonder people have created all kinds of fake versions of Jesus so we can avoid some of this tough love he is dishing out.

So like it or not, this is where we are today on our wilderness journey. This is the gospel of Mark's version of Jesus temptation from the devil that is much more elaborate in Matthew and Luke—where the Adversary tempts Jesus with all sorts of ways to betray God—turn stones to loaves of bread after 40 days of no food, worship evil and be given power and authority over the earth, throw yourself off the highest cliff and command the angels to save you.

To each one, Jesus has an answer—not today, Satan, I am staying with God and the truth that sets me free from allegiance to the powers and principalities.

In this passage in Mark, it is Peter who is the one who attempts to thwart the divine order of things, the path that Jesus is on. Here the word *satan* refers to anyone who is a tempter in a cruel, morally wrong, diabolical way. Peter (interestingly enough, the one who would also be called the rock the church is built on, hmmm) is the tempter—the one who tells Jesus to stop with the suffering and death thing, stop with the calling out the religious officials and the powerful people thing, stop with the embarrassing breaking ranks with the most respected people in the community thing. Peter was embarrassed of Jesus—and wanted him to stop. So he rebukes Jesus.

That word for rebuke *epitimao* is the word that is used for silencing demons. So Peter is basically saying to Jesus, are you insane?? You need an exorcism. Peter is trying to get in God's way, he's trying to get in between Jesus and God.

There's also the fact that Peter is the disciple, the student, and Jesus is the teacher, the one to be followed. So, he's not respecting Jesus's authority either. He's trying to get Jesus to follow him instead of him following Jesus.

Now keep in mind that Jesus is not just talking to disciples here, he is talking to the crowds. So, this is all happening out in public so to speak. Peter, you really just told Jesus he needs an exorcism in public???

So, Jesus comes back with the same kind of energy—get behind me satan—not that Peter is the actual devil, but that Peter is being rebuked right back, as someone doing the work of the adversary, not of God. Peter is trying to be the one to recalculate the route, but he’s got it wrong. Recalculating the route because of fear or protection of our own interests, isn’t the path that God invites us to follow when we follow Jesus.

Peter shows us the ugly truth of how we can say we are Jesus followers until the going gets tough, we can lose our way, lose our bearings, forget who we’re talking to—we can lose our faith because of things like power, influence, respectability, wealth, comfort, fear.

So then Jesus says to the crowds—if you want to follow me, you have to take up your cross, you have to lose your life to gain it.

This has induced all sorts of reactions in Christian history—from martyrdom to self-hatred to service to others to perpetual prayer to ministry to all kinds of ways humans have interpreted what Jesus is inviting here. It’s also been a phrase that Empire and colonizers and abusers and protectors of the status quo appropriated for their dehumanizing purposes. The sacrificial tropes of the institutional church are loaded with dissembling for false purposes.

That’s why we have to be careful here, Grace Covenant. There’s some familiar mapping in our spirits with this language, mapping that we might have to disentangle ourselves from. Because when people start talking about selflessness or self sacrifice in a capitalist economy, there are some big red flags! God is not asking us to sacrifice our lives and our well being to keep the economy going or to maintain institutions. We have to be careful, very careful about the ways all these messages get tangled up in our tracking and navigation systems.

What does it mean to lose your life to gain it in God’s kin-dom? It can’t mean erasure of our uniqueness and our life energy, it can’t mean deprivation and fear, it can’t mean self-hatred and hiding from God and from our community.

(get to the last part about ashamed)

What does it mean that the scripture here says Jesus will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of him. LOADED also with all kinds of dangerous history—anti-semitism, Christian triumphalism, colonialism, genocide.

So, it can't mean that! But we also can't just gloss over it because we don't like mean old Jesus making us feel bad about something we did or didn't do.

I spent some time with this part of the passage—and I think about the withering nature of a parent or authority figure saying something like “I am ashamed of you.” That is devastating.

And then I also think about the world and how lost we are—and how cruel humans are to each other. I think about Gaza, Congo, Ukraine. I think about human trafficking. I think about chattel slavery, and state sanctioned violence. I think about how guns are the leading cause of death of children. I think about how many 13 million kids hungry in the US and 1.2 million children unhoused on any given night in the most wealthy country in the world. I think about the degradation of the planet—the cancer rates and disease rates due to pollution and poisons in our waterways. I think about all these things and I am ashamed. I am sad, but I am also ashamed of our lostness, of our short sightedness, of our refusal to stop being so consumptive and excessive, our refusal to stand up to bullies and strongmen, our laxity around healthy boundaries, our normalizing of the dehumanization of Black and brown people, our avoidance and denial about those living on the streets and without adequate care and resources, that books are being banned that teach our children the true history of this country or the truth about their bodies.

Jesus could be ashamed—because it brings embarrassment to him that he wasn't more effective, that we didn't listen, that his messaging was not strong enough or clear enough or that somehow he failed at his assignment from God to show us the way home to God and each other.

That's why we are doing the hard work we are doing—not to avoid God's punishment, but to be those who truly trust God's promises—that losing our lives is freedom, and finding the God in each other is the way we'll find home.

And Jesus used strong words with his often stubborn and recalcitrant followers because these issues are life and death—that's why it matters, that's why it is hard, that's why when we catch glimpses of God's promises unfolding before our eyes, that we are in awe and we are humbled and we are beyond grateful—and we trust the angels around us and we trust that God is here. Right here—in this emerging community that is leaning into something some of us thought was not possible in this life— a place where we can heal together, a place where we can be liberated together, a place where we can make the world a better place together and not get erased in the process—because a world that erases and deprives us is not the kingdom of God at all.

And sometimes, in the hard work we are doing to tune ourselves to the real GPS—the God Positioning System—we have to say “not today” to the dissemblers. We have to say, “wrong turn” to those who want to throw us off the path or tell us we are going the wrong way. Sense into what you know in the part of you that is synced up with the divine—trust Spirit when She says, “recalculating route” and as you to do hard things are the good of all.

That’s the GPS we can trust in the deepest parts of wilderness that life in this world brings us to—The God Positioning System, that shows us the way.

Thanks be to God.