

Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

What happens to us when the reality we are living turns out to be quite a bit different from what we had expected? Each of us has in mind some ideal...some expectation...some desire for things to be a certain way. And each one of us has been faced with a situation...or more than one situation...where the idea that we have doesn't match what really happens. That's a recipe for disappointment and sometimes disillusionment. And it's nothing new. It's been happening since the beginning of time. We get caught up short by a reality check. And our minds do incredible gymnastics to avoid dealing with the reality...including flat out denial that what is happening is actually happening.

That's the situation the disciples find themselves in when we meet up with Jesus this morning. While Jesus and Peter and James and John have been to the mountaintop, the disciples have been trying to use the power to heal that Jesus has given them...and they fail to exorcize a young boy from a demon. When Jesus catches up with them on his way back from the mountain and the transfiguration, he finds the disciples in a bit of a row with the scribes over this very thing. When Jesus joins them, the boy's father rushes up to Jesus and explains the situation and Jesus heals the boy on the spot.

But that wasn't his first priority. When he returns to Galilee, he wants it to be under the radar. He doesn't want to draw any big crowds and he doesn't want to get sidetracked by being presented with healing situations. He's just come down from the mountaintop. He's had a summit meeting with Elijah and Moses. He's had his mission confirmed and he's been strengthened for what lies ahead of him. And he's also gotten God's confirmation of who he is. The voice in the cloud had said, "This is my Son. Listen to him!" Jesus has come down from the mountain with a single purpose in mind: teaching the disciples about what they need to know about him and about what lies ahead. That's all that's on his mind. He desperately wants some uninterrupted time alone with his disciples to explain all this to them.

Jesus has asked his disciples who people think that he is. And then he asked them who *they* think he is and Peter identifies him as the Messiah. Peter is convinced by all he's seen and all he's heard. The coming of the Messiah has long been the dream and expectation for the Jewish people. The Messiah will come from the House of David, the greatest king in Israel's history. And Jesus is from the House of David. He will restore the monarchy to Israel. He will come with all of God's might and glory and will save the people from their oppressors. In Jesus' day, the

oppressors were the Romans. But Israel has known other oppressors in its history. Peter is convinced that Jesus is the powerful right arm of God who has appeared on the earth to deliver the Jewish people from Rome just as Moses had delivered them from the Egyptian Pharaoh. This is it, he thinks. The time has finally come and Jesus is the one. That's the idea he has in his head, but Jesus has a reality check for him. That's not the way it's going to be. Jesus is going to be handed over to the authorities and they are going to kill him and on the third day he is going to rise from the dead. Peter can't hear that!! He argues with Jesus and Jesus reprimands him with, "Get behind me Satan!"

So Jesus has already told the disciples for the first time what's going to happen to him and they can't hear it. Peter flatly denies it. The mental image and the reality don't match up. In today's lesson, after he heals the little boy that the disciples couldn't heal, he tells them for a second time. "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." Once again, the disciples can't hear him. The gospel of Mark tells us that they didn't understand and they were afraid to ask him. Maybe they didn't want to ask him because they had seen and heard the dressing down that Peter had gotten when he had challenged this whole notion. And maybe they didn't ask any questions because they simply didn't want to know. They were silent. It's a reality check that no one wants to deal with!

But something was bugging them, because as they walked along on their way to Capernaum, they started to argue. Maybe they were arguing about why they had been unable to heal the little boy with a demon. Whose fault was it? Which one of them had messed up? Maybe they were feeling insecure about how Jesus was feeling about their failure. Maybe they were jockeying for position because all of them were questioning themselves. They were trying to establish who was the greatest among them.

When Jesus asked them at Capernaum what they had been arguing about, they confessed. Jesus took that opportunity to teach a little more. He explained that the greatest people were the ones who were the servants of others...the ones who put others' needs first. The greatest were the ones who spread kindness and generosity to those who held no status in society and could not repay them. Jesus used a little child as an example. A child in the world they inhabited had no power; no rights; no place in society; no stature; no resources; no independence; nothing of secular worth. But Jesus enfolds this child as an example of the kind of people we are to enfold...the ones who don't have enough; the ones with no social standing; the ones who are vulnerable; the ones who can do nothing for us in return except express their gratitude. If we are to be followers of Jesus Christ...if we are to do as he commanded, we are to take care of the ones who cannot take care of themselves. And in doing so, Jesus said that we are taking care of him. And if we welcome him, Jesus said, we also welcome the one who sent him.

But that's not the way things are in this world. That's not the way people believed it was supposed to be. That's the complete inverse of how things in society are supposed to work...or so they thought. Jesus' instructions are not only radical, they turn the known world upside down. This kind of teaching disrupts what people have come to believe is the natural order of things. It messes with the social order which makes people in power both nervous and angry. It's not only a radical position to take. It's a dangerous one.

And we still struggle with this today. And we are no strangers to this kind of social order. We don't have a monarchy in this country, but we do have a political and a financial aristocracy. We hear stories daily on the news about vulnerable people who are denied rights that we take for granted. About other human beings...more vulnerable than we are...who are abused and taken advantage of...who sell their souls to keep a job. The phenomenon has not gone away.

And who among us has not 'jockeyed' for position. For us maybe it is a plumby job or a promotion with substantially more money. Maybe it is the big house on the hill that will announce to the world that we've made it! Maybe it's a highly coveted new car with all the bells and whistles. Maybe it is prestige in our social circle or in our workplace. We all want to be reassured that we are important. We all want to feel like we are successful. We all have some benchmark of how we will know when we've 'made it.' We all have mental images of what those things will be for us. We spend our lives on the uphill climb on our way to the top.

It's like riding an escalator that's going up. Sometimes we just stand in one place and rise anyway. And sometimes we take a step or two up to get there sooner. But the reality is, we're going in the wrong direction! Jesus told us to ride the escalator that's going down. Go find the people at the bottom of the heap, not the ones at the top. The ones at the top of the heap can show us how to get a bit higher...or keep us from going any further, but the ones at the bottom of the heap can show us the face of God. The vulnerable ones who need us...who need our protection and our voices and our actions...are where we will find true life and where we will find Jesus.

Jesus gave us a specific charge...take care of the ones who are vulnerable. While our hearts might be in the right place, it's a command that goes against the grain. Our natural inclination is toward upward mobility. That's the nature of human nature. And that's the way our society is structured. Jesus' instructions are hard...as usual. Everything Jesus teaches us to do seems to go against the grain. All of it seems to be the opposite of our natural inclination. But our natural inclinations are not what is going to give us life. We probably know that even as we're climbing up that escalator. Our notion and mental image of the way things are *supposed* to be is the exact opposite of the way Jesus says things really are. Now *that's* a reality check!

Do you want to find Jesus? Then get on the down escalator! AMEN.