

It's Rally Sunday! Yay! Since we started planning for September 12th to be Rally Sunday I've gotten a lot of questions about what the heck it is. My answer has evolved a bit over the months, but it's essentially the church's kickoff for the year ahead. It's a moment to gather up the energy of people returning from summer vacations, of launching into the start of a new school year, and carry it into our life in the church. By marking Rally Sunday, we are also sort of girding ourselves for all that's to come - another winter, another holiday season, a new year, and all that it may hold.

Regardless of how we think of it though, there is a subtle shift at this time of year that I think Rally Sunday seeks to participate in, that it wants to mark in some way. So while this might just feel like another Sunday in the Time after Pentecost, it seems like a good time to ask a basic question about this thing we call church. The question that came up for me this week, dwelling in these texts was this: What is it exactly that we are doing here together?

I think Jesus was feeling a sense of that shift, the urgency of it, when he asked the disciples “Who do people say that I am?” I hear this question as “Are they getting it? Are the people figuring it out?” It’s a good moment in the gospel to pause and ask this basic question: It’s the exact halfway point in Mark, and he’s been busy so far: Battling demons, healing the sick, teaching, feeding multitudes, calming storms, and contending with the religious leaders.

Hearing the disciples’ answer as to what people are calling him (John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets), I hear some concern in his voice when he turns and asks them “But who do you say that I am?” My brothers, my followers, are you at least getting it?

“You are the Messiah,” Peter says, essentially saying, “Yes, we’re getting it.”

I wonder if this prediction of his suffering, rejection, death and rising again that came next depended in some way on the answer Peter gave. Whether it did or not, that prediction upset Peter to the point where he takes Jesus aside and “rebukes him.”

I’m going to pause here for a moment.

This is the first of three predictions Jesus will give in Mark. And looking at them side-by-side, you can see something like a symmetry emerging. The second prediction is followed immediately with a question the disciples have been arguing about - “Who among us is the greatest?” Jesus tells them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). The Third prediction is followed immediately with a request by James and John, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must [be servant] of all” (10:43-44). Based on these next two predictions, what do you think Peter was saying to Jesus as he rebuked him here, for speaking of what was to come? Without Peter’s words, we have only Jesus’ response “Get behind me Satan; you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Do you see some symmetry?

Jesus has been telling them that his suffering and death are coming, essentially upsetting (in a huge way) what was expected of a Messiah that was worth their salt. For there were a good number of expectations in circulation at the time of who the Messiah would be: A powerful healer/prophet on the order of Elijah was one; a military leader after the fashion of King David himself was another (and perhaps the more popular). Jesus' prediction of his own suffering and death was way outside what they were expecting the Messiah to be, who they were wanting Jesus to be. Whatever Peter said, Jesus' prediction of what was to come disagreed with what Peter and the disciples believed the Messiah would do. Suffering and death for the one just named the Messiah? No way!

At least two things come into focus looking at all three predictions. The disciples see the world they're living in and want a Messiah who is a match for it - power for power, army for army - a Messiah able to overthrow the systems of power that oppress. This is the Messiah they signed up to follow, a Messiah that handed out good seats and named "the greatest" in... regular terms, one that did not suffer or die by worldly power. They were stuck in a vision of success that was dictated by the world they wanted Jesus to change. But what's also clear is that, with each repeated prediction, they continue to miss that Jesus is offering a life that flips the world upside down. This is a different sort of Messiah indeed.

So what is it that we're doing here together, week after week?

There's a parallel I want to draw that helps us answer this question. Peter knows the word for who Jesus is, so when Jesus asks "But who do you say that I am?" he gets it right: "You are the Messiah." It's a single moment with a mountain of meaning behind it, meaning that he and the disciples will continue to miss along the way.

Can you think of anything we do together that is a single moment with a mountain of meaning behind it?

In Luther's Large Catechism, he writes,

This act or ceremony consists of being dipped into the water... and being drawn out again. These two parts... point to the power and effect of baptism which is nothing else than the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of a new creature, both of which must continue in us our whole life long. Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after...

Peter's naming Jesus the Messiah, like our baptism, was not the end\* but a beginning. The difference between saying who Jesus is and knowing who Jesus is seems to be what we encounter in this gospel reading. It is the difference between being baptized and living a baptismal life as a follower of Jesus. The journey of unveiling who Jesus truly is was the journey that began, for Peter, when he proclaimed Jesus Messiah. The journey of unveiling who Jesus is began for us, begins for us, in baptism. It is the moment of yes, and now let the unveiling begin.

So this is what we gather Sunday mornings to do together - to unveil Jesus Christ, our Savior, the Messiah, more and more. We continue that journey week after week, more uncovered in communion with God and each other than we could ever do alone. And thanks be to God that our Messiah gives us the shape this journey must take - the form that shapes us into followers of Jesus. "Let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me," Jesus says, "losing your life for my sake but finally saving it."

And this is all Spirit work, remember. That moment of yes over the water. That moment of recognition where we name, like Peter, and see the path stretched out ahead - it is all the work of the Spirit, drawing us further and farther.

Which brings me back to Rally Sunday. After the service today, we will brunch. And while we eat we'll be hearing about the ministries of Messiah, some that are ongoing, some that are waiting for Covid to blow away, and some that need some loving attention. What you'll be hearing is less **information** than it is **invitation**. We will be showcasing all the opportunities available for your **participation** in the baptismal life we share discerning the path Jesus bids us follow.

Fr. Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations this week were on the theme of "Life is Participation." I want to lift up two things he said. First, speaking of *Religion as Participation*, he says, "It constantly recognizes that we are part of something more than we are observing something or [even] 'believing' something." And this,

[Participation] is no mere rule-following behavior; rather it is our actual identity in God... [so] we do things because they are true and loving, not because we *have to* do them or because we are afraid of punishment. ... [We] are not so much *driven from without...* but *drawn from within...*

So as you munch, simply listen. Turn the attention of your heart to what you're hearing and attend to what you're drawn to. You'll be hearing what defines the lifeblood of this community, and the invitation will be the Spirit's - bidding you follow the path of community, of service, of unveiling the meaning that Messiah holds. Participation is the hallmark of what it means to follow Jesus, and we make the path by walking.

AMEN

It constantly recognizes that *we are a part of something* more than we are observing something or “believing” in something.

It is not mere rule-following behavior; rather, it is our actual identity in God that is radically changing us. **Henceforth, we do things because they are true and loving, not because we *have to* do them or because we are afraid of punishment. Now we are not so much *driven from without* (the false self method) but we are *drawn from within* (the True Self method).** The generating motor is inside us now instead of either a lure or a threat from outside us. This alone is a converted Christian, or converted anything.

For those who hear his predictions and know where his path leads, we know it is not for the faint of heart: Denial of self, cross carrying, the loss of life, maybe even shame lie along the path. But these are the tools Jesus gives us to get unstuck from the vision of success the world puts in our way (The old Adam). These are the tools Jesus gives to help us see what our baptism means. These form the shape of our days as, and even mark the path by which we return to this baptism (over and over again) so that others might know the way.

But Peter’s declaration of Jesus’ identity and our encounter with the risen Savior in baptism, is about nothing less than complete transformation. It is the first step on the path but we will be different at its end.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana wrote a sermon on the 2nd Sunday of Lent this year. That was the last time we heard this gospel reading. In it she writes, “If we’re honest, many of us really don’t want this kind of saving.” She points out that

It’s interesting to be looking back at the long path of Lent, the long path or return to our baptism that Lent represents, and to be seeing again this Rally

Sunday. For the path continues. The glory of the risen Christ shines but for a moment before the world darkens around him, distracting us and offering shorter routes

- It seems like a pretty good time to ask a basic question: what is it that we are doing together? (Less what we are doing, than what is being done to us... )

Journeying together from Baptized and beloved to followers of The Way Disciples, followers.

Lots of “ways” on offer in this culture and world of ours.

Peter has subscribed to the way of glory, but not only Peter (3 predictions)

Jesus describes another way

Leads to transformation - many of us don't want this...

Learning what “The Messiah” means is the path that takes him and the rest of the disciples to the place where finally they will know.

We haven't mentioned that Jesus has also predicted his rising from the dead. As the disciples miss that all together in all three predictions, I thought it would be ok to skip. But what I will say is that in Mark, it's only there that the disciples finally realize who this Messiah truly is.

MaryAnn McKibben Dana article... instead?

What strikes me most about this last part of our reading is just how counter it is to the culture we live in. Deny yourself, take up your cross... lose your life to save it... Do these directives ring true to the world we live in today? Are they conducive to the desires of a consumer culture? It's the water we're swimming in and Jesus is telling us that to follow him means to swim

upstream. It is unrealistic (to put it gently) for him to tell us to not be ashamed as we struggle to follow him against a culture content to coast with the current. This is Jesus describing another way, the way he bids us follow...

In Luther's Small Catechism, a tool he developed for the teaching of the faith, he answers the question of a child regarding baptism: What then is the significance of such a baptism with water? He answers, "It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

That word "daily" is what I wanted you to hear most in there.

In an effort to "fill my reservoir," I am doing an online course right now on meditation. The instructor has talked about meditation as a tool to help us practice the kind of people we want to be in the world. "The more we experience something, the more we practice it, the more we become it."

So what is it exactly that we are doing here together? We are struggling upstream my friends. We are subjecting ourselves to another way, the way of Jesus, who bids us follow. We are leaning on the moment of our baptism and becoming daily what we ...

Jesus helps us to put aside what we wish he is and helps us take up who he truly is.

Sometimes we get it wrong. The pressures of the world's perspective tempt us toward glory...

Those who lose their life will save it...

The burden of swimming upstream (Theology of glory, theology of cross)  
- continually transforming as we learn, against world... (sacramental)  
Move toward suffering, never away from it.

Heard part of this Gospel before - Lent II...

Rebuke of Peter

Back and forth - Lent II and fall...

Peter answers right, just the start of the journey

Peter gets it wrong, called to a path (the rest of the journey)...

First of three predictions (Suffering, death and being raised)

The other two are followed by disciple pursuit of glory...

James, Psalm, Isaiah - tongue and ear - speaking and listening

Isaiah - suffering servant 1

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus addresses this question to his first followers, and he addresses it to us. Like the disciples, we might come up with a variety of answers. But even if we, with Peter, speak of Jesus as Messiah and Savior, our response is the beginning and not the end of a theological, spiritual, and ethical journey. It's a journey guided by questions such as, Is our image of Savior one of someone who sanctions our ideas of power and prestige? Or does it invite us to consider the cost of discipleship and redefine the nature of power and relationships in our personal, congregational, and political lives?

Spiritual practices undergird social action. Accordingly, socially active congregations must make spiritual practices essential to their mission.

Bruce Epperly

In Jesus, a descendant of Abraham and Sarah, we are able to see fully and completely both God and ourselves. We learn who God is and what it means to be human. And though it has been centuries, I don't think we yet understand. On God's side of the covenant in Christ Jesus, there is no error, only pure truth of both divinity and humanity. But on our side of the covenant, there is still trial and error—just like in our human covenant relationships. So the conversation continues. We are still learning what it means to be human, even as we learn who God truly is.

Our Gospel reading offers an example. A few verses earlier, Peter has gotten it right by proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. But in this passage Peter also shows himself to be wrong—trial and error. He assumes that as God's servant, the Messiah is here to bring God's wrath down upon God's enemies. But Jesus goes on to say how the wrath of the Romans will come down upon *him* and he will be crucified. For Peter, this surely can't happen if Jesus is truly God's Messiah. Peter thinks he knows who God is, but the conversation-made-flesh-in-history will prove him wrong.