

October 7, 2018

Crucified, Dead, Buried

Mark 10:32-34

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How I've learned about death?

Beaumont – Caroline Lovejoy hanging on, Murder of a Kindergarten teacher

Altoona – AIDS, the care at home of long-time spouses

Tennessee – from Meg, taught me how to sit in silence, be in the room (Ruby)

My own grandparents, pets, allowing my own mortality to be at least an occasional companion

Sometimes “how” we are going to die is well known – Tuesdays with Morrie – Mitch Albom, Morrie Schwartz; Last Lecture Randy Pausch – Carnegie Mellon Professor “Really Achieving your Childhood Dreams”

Other times it comes as a shock – the call that you never want to receive

Jesus' death was in a sense – both – BIBLICALLY he warned his disciples (3 x each) in Matthew, Mark, and Luke specifically how he would die, but in a sense, it was still shocking. They couldn't believe it. They didn't want to believe it. They didn't want to hear what he had to tell them.

The 3 times in the synoptic gospels occur around similar, but not the same stories.

- 1) In all 3, Peter is asked what he believes about Jesus, and he says, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus tells all the disciples not to tell anyone.
- 2) The second tellings all occur after the casting out of a demon, or some kind of healing exorcism.
- 3) The last one is more ambiguous – but often comes with conversation about who is greatest, or that the disciples who left their life to follow Jesus will be rewarded. Who gets to claim the kingdom?

Why do these things inspire Jesus to tell his friends about what he anticipates being a gruesome end, being mocked, put on trial, crucified, and buried?

It's interesting to me that he doesn't sit his disciples down and tell them that he's going to die for their sins. That interpretation comes much later.

The foreshadowing of his death is claiming for his disciples how he is going to live his life.

- 1) Peter thinks Jesus has a claim to being the Messiah. He does seem to fit into the prophecies well. He has ties to King David. He had an unusual birth story. He's teaching in ways that fit the prophets' telling of a servant who will right the wrongs. But claiming that title absolutely puts a target on his back and on the backs of his followers as well. "You think I'm the Messiah Peter" – shut up about it. All of you shut up about it. I already know I'm going to die for this – don't endanger yourselves by trying to stir up a revolution.
- 2) The casting out of demonic forces – Demons don't go quietly into the night. They shriek. They fight. They make a ruckus of trying to hold on to their power and possessiveness of their human victims. The more Jesus calls out evil, the more evil will want to put a stop to him. Every martyred person has faced this adversary. The more good you become. The more evil you call out. The more those who are swept up in evil will want you annihilated.
- 3) Jesus also tries to make it plain to his disciples that he isn't looking to start a cult. Cults always have hierarchies of greatness, who is closest to the leader. Even now, you can find about 7 -10 people in the world who claim they are the second coming of Jesus Christ. How do we know they aren't the real deal? That's a good question. If they are setting themselves up for greatness, with a hierarchy of followers demanding complete obedience, it really doesn't sound like the Jesus I know.

Well, we know from the story that Jesus death came to be exactly as he told it. He would be taken, flogged, mocked, humiliated and hung on a cross to die. I dare say that it has something to do with these stories that ought to give us pause before we begin to reckon with the idea that Jesus died so that we would know ultimate forgiveness.

Jesus knew he was going to die much in the same way that Martin Luther King Jr knew he was going to die, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew he was going to die. He was representing the underside of society as the Messiah anointed to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives. He could make evil demons jump in his presence. And he refused to be the head of a cultish religion – even though cultish religions have sprung up in later generations in his name.

So when he tells us this in the teaching years of his life it is important for us to understand that he is calling us in the living years of our lives to work for justice, to fight evil, and follow humbly. That's the Jesus way, and it's a way that puts a target on our backs as well. It isn't so easy to do this well. Which brings me to the next point. There's no way we can do it perfectly. All we can do is to try this imperfectly. His conquering of death on the cross frees us from those times we don't get it all right. It doesn't give us an escape hatch to forget about what the disciples of Jesus were facing in their time, because it's true that we will face just as hard a time being Christians like that in our own time. What Jesus does is allow his death to be transforming. We are not alone in the struggle. We can be free of guilt and shame.

When I think about all I've learned about death, and how I've known people in their last weeks or days, there is comfort in knowing that Jesus is love and forgiveness and justice and truth. It is the peace that passes all understanding to be at home in these Biblical stories, and understand that Jesus' love is all-encompassing. But for those who have spent their lives condemning others, or suffering from the guilt someone has laid upon their shoulders, death is hard. If the timing is more known or unknown, it doesn't matter, how we live speaks much to how we will die. Jesus died ready. I don't know how – given what he had to go through. But that's why we focus nearly as much attention on how he died as to how he lived. Both are important. Both have much to teach.

Death will come for us all. It seems difficult to talk about it or prepare for it. And yet, the more that we live fully, the better prepared we are to die well.

My homework this week is to tell at least one – but maybe a few people in your life how important they are to you. That's what Jesus was doing by letting his disciples in on this knowledge. He shared a soul-truth, the intimacy that he knew his path was leading to something he was well within the scope of his humanity to fear. Whether we are afraid of death or not, I think we all fear the separation from loved ones. I know I do. Let them know that you are living your life to the best of God's plan, and that in life or in death, you belong to God and they do too. Amen.