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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
17th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Mark 8:27-38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and SAVIOR, Jesus Christ. Amen

Nike recently introduced a new slogan to go with a series of ads that says, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything." For Nike this means believing in the individual ability to achieve greatness. Football celebrity Colin Kaepernick narrates one ad that talks about not just being the fastest runner on your block but the fastest runner ever, and setting other similar, fantastic goals. Of course, with Kaepernick as spokesman Nike also alludes to believing in something more than personal achievement.

I won't take sides on that debate this morning, but as I reflected on our gospel reading for today it seems to me Jesus is using a similar message as Nike's slogan, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything." In this passage Jesus asks us, "What do you believe about me?" He then goes on to say, "If you do believe in me, then you will need to sacrifice everything or 'deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.'"

Over the coming weeks our gospel readings will give us examples of what Jesus means by denying ourselves and taking up our cross. Today, I'd like to focus on the first part, believing in Jesus, because there's no point to sacrificing if we don't know why or for whom we're doing it.

Jesus first asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and their three answers point to Jesus as a prophet of God.

Historically, a prophet of Israel served as the voice of God for the people. Jesus has certainly been acting like a prophet—speaking difficult words to those in authority, especially the Pharisees, healing, and teaching.

A couple of chapters ago in Mark, Herod recalled the story of how he had the prophet John the Baptist beheaded and when he hears about Jesus he is sure that John has come back from the dead. So it's not surprising that that rumor might have spread and other people are wondering if Jesus is really John the Baptist.

Elijah was probably the greatest of all the Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings Elijah's story ends when a chariot of fire and horses of fire came down from the skies and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. (2 Kings 2:11) That means that Elijah didn't die an earthly death, and at the very end of the Old Testament, the Lord promises to send Elijah again "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (Malachi 4:5) Since the Jewish people were expecting Elijah to return, Jesus seemed like a good possibility to be the fulfillment of that promise.

The people also wonder if Jesus is just another in a long line of prophets, one who speaks God's word to the people.

Similar descriptions of Jesus are still present today. Some say Jesus was just one of many prophetic voices throughout history, like Gandhi or the Dalai Lama or the Pope. Some will say Jesus was a great teacher and people look to his words for inspiration. Or he simply served as a good example for people to learn from and try to follow. These are not wrong entirely.

Jesus did teach us many things. Jesus did speak God's word to the people of his day and to us who still read these words. Jesus does ask us to follow him into a new way of life, just as he invited the disciples away from their fishing boats and tax collector's tables to be about God's business of saving souls.

But these descriptions are not all that Jesus was or is. Which is why, along with Peter, we must hear Jesus' next question as addressed to us, too. "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Peter replied, "You are the Messiah." Now you might remember this same conversation from Matthew's gospel where Jesus praises Peter for this correct response and tells him that on this faith he will build his church. But Mark doesn't tell that part. Jesus doesn't disagree with Peter's claim but he warns his disciples not to tell anyone about him. That seems strange. Why wouldn't he want them to correct all those other misconceptions about him? Probably because of the misconceptions that surrounded the title of Messiah.

The word Messiah comes from the Hebrew and when that was translated into Greek they used the word "Christos" or Christ. So when we say Jesus Christ, we are also saying Jesus, the Messiah, the one God promised to send to redeem and save Israel.

Save them from what? That's where Peter's confusion comes in. The expectation of the Jewish people was that the Messiah would be an anointed king from the line of David, who would come and free Israel from whatever political power was oppressing them. So, in the time of Jesus that would have been Rome. They were expecting this Messiah to restore Israel's independence and dominance among the other nations.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the one God sent to the world to bring freedom and salvation, but not in the ways that the Jewish people expected. As human beings, their minds—like ours—were set on earthly things. We can't help it. This earthly life is our frame of reference. When we call out to God to save us, we want to be saved from earthly powers—political oppression, physical illness, abusive relationships, grief or pain, anything that makes us feel bound or enslaved—the things that seem to control us.

Peter expected Jesus to be a conqueror. When Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" we are drawn back to Jesus' temptations in the wilderness just after his baptism. Satan tempted Jesus with power, prestige, and turning his loyalty away from God. Maybe Jesus saw that temptation happening again in Peter's argument that the Messiah he expected would not suffer, be rejected and killed.

We struggle with that too. We call on Jesus to save us, and it is right that we do! But sometimes our prayers are answered in ways that are not what we expect. We, or our loved ones, are not completely healed. The oppression we feel from difficult relationships doesn't

magically go away. The political and social systems of the world that bring heartache and division are not swiftly changed. What kind of savior is Jesus?

The good news in the gospel today is that Jesus did rise on the third day, just as he said he would. We know that his suffering was not the last word. His rejection was not the last word. Not even his death was the last word. On this side of Jesus' resurrection we are witnesses to the new life Jesus gives in the face of suffering, rejection, and death.

Remember that Nike slogan? "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything." Jesus did that. Jesus believed in the possibility of redeeming and saving this broken world. Jesus entered into the sin of this world that holds us captive and he believed in God's power found in love, grace, and mercy to bring new life to the world.

And because Jesus believed that this world is worth saving, he sacrificed everything. Jesus denied himself in the giving of his life. He could have swooped down from heaven to overthrow the powers of this world, but that's not the kind of God we have. We have a God who invites followers. We have a God who loves us into a loving relationship. We have a God who suffers with us and for us, and brings us through the turmoil into new life.

Belief in God's power to free us from the power of sin and death in this earthly life frees us to live in new ways that look to God for our strength and salvation.

Sometimes that new life is experienced now and often in unexpected ways. Sometimes we will receive it in the life to come, but that does not mean that Jesus is not present or showing us a new way of living today.

Over the next few weeks let's spend some time considering Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" We'll return to it as we look at the ways Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and lose our lives so that we can know what it means to truly live.

Thanks be to God! Amen