

“Attentiveness in Our Lenten Walk”

Mark 8:31-33

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Mark 8:31-33 *31Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But 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.”*

During these Sundays before Easter, we are attentive to what it means to be a Christian. As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem in our gospel lections, we ponder how to *stand* and *walk* in solidarity with Jesus. What does it mean for me to be his disciple?

During this season of Lent, many of us are familiar with the **practice of giving up**. We give up something for the season: eating meat or chocolate or watching television. We give up something we love in order to remember the one who loves us without condition. We give up something (or, we ‘sacrifice’ something) as a way of remembering Jesus who gave up his life (made the ultimate ‘sacrifice’) for us. This practice of giving up can be a meaningful practice through which to deepen our lives as disciples.

But so can the **practice of taking up**. Instead of giving up something for Lent, we ponder things to *take up*. We take up the discipline of letter writing, for example, or of being intentionally in touch with old friends or family with whom we have drifted apart. This is what Liz Caldwell describes as her Lenten practice. (She’s written the book that your Sunday school class is studying.)

Giving something up for Lent can create space for taking up something in Lent. Giving something up can create an awareness of something you can take up, or give, to the world. One creates the space for the other. (*I’ve been grateful for all of you taking up duties on Wednesday night to be cooks, servers, and table partners for our DREAAM Youth Club.*)

Giving up and/or taking up something can be a means of being a more attentive disciple.

But here’s a warning: Whether we *give* something up or *take* something up during Lent, our culture won’t cooperate. Our culture is mindlessly busy, busy, busy. And our culture wants to suck us into that mindlessness. Stay busy. Stay tired. Work hard. Create longer and longer to-do lists. You must accomplish. You must achieve. You are “worth” only what you “do,” *not* who you are. Never stop to smell the roses. Fail to notice how the sun shines longer each day and the how doves are building nests and soon will soon be laying eggs.

There’s lots of noise in our culture. There are many distractions. And this clanging and banging works against the spiritual life.

I invite you during these days of preparation for Easter to pause. Take Holy Pause. Study. Dream. Pray.

Notice what’s around you. Take a moment to stand at your mailbox, to face the sunshine, to close your eyes, to breathe slowly, deeply, gratefully. Your neighbors might worry about you having a spiritual moment at your mailbox. But there will be no reason for them to worry. You are attempting to be wholly

present to the moment. Who knew that walking out to get your mail could be a holy pilgrimage? *But it could.* Twenty-five steps out. Twenty-five steps in. If we play it right, this can take us a long, long way.

We might call this spiritual attentiveness. Listen to the poet Mary Oliver: *“Ten times a day something happens to me like this—some strengthening throb of amazement—some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”*

Poor Peter hasn't been paying attention. Peter was guilty of getting caught up in the ways of the world. Naturally, he wants to protect Jesus from suffering. Naturally, Peter doesn't like his friend talking about sacrifice. Jesus is talking about the bigger picture, though, and Peter is interested only in his small part of the world, his part of the world, his life, his friend. Jesus is talking about spiritual things, bigger things, and Peter is too stuck in the traffic of “now” to really hear Jesus, in the first place.

Peter, God is at work doing a new thing in me, in us, Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying, join with me, not against me. Don't stand in the way of this holy journey. Join me, brother. Come along.

The way Mark puts it, Jesus puts a finer point on it. Jesus says, *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Peter was missing Jesus' whole point. And Jesus' point is to live attentively. Care for the least of these. Focus on God; listen for God in the hush of life. Serve God with your whole self. Go deeper in the study of scripture; don't just accept other people's Sunday school answers. Pray deeply and often. Make space for calm. Think of others before you think of yourself. Slow down. Look around. Seek justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

Peter was missing the point.

During the season of Lent, we try to take a small step back and ponder attentively what it means to stand and walk like Jesus. We don't want to miss out on anything, like Peter did. We want to work with Jesus, not against him. We have much to learn.

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This morning, I'd like to introduce you to some others who are making this Lenten journey with us. These are real people trying to be attentive to their spiritual walk. You are related to some of them. They are our brothers and sisters. And they are seeking God's Spirit to guide their steps.

Joe and Rachel will share these stories in the form a litany (a prayer?) in which you are invited to participate. Joe or Rachel will say: *Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.* You are invited to respond with the word: **Alleluia!**

Leader: Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.
People: **Alleluia!**

A Litany for the Season of Lent

Joe: Jesus invites us to walk with him through the valley, bearing light and love to all we meet.

Rachel: God is with us on the Low Road and on the High.

J: Jesus invites us to the mountaintop, where the view allows a glimpse of eternity.

R: God is with us on the High Road and on the Low.

J: As we make our Lenten way to Jerusalem, to an upper room, to a garden, and to a cross, may we thank God for the saints with whom we share this holy journey.

R: Make us grateful, Holy God, for you are God-With-Us, Emmanuel.

J: I am a 70-year-old man. My wife died in a car accident five years ago. I'm still numb. I miss her. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: I'm a 15-year-old girl. I have three boys in my class—THREE!—who say they “love me.” I hardly know what love is. And I don't feel love, I feel pressure! ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: Encourage us in the valley, O God, that we might share your glory.

J: Church bores me still. Scripture has absolutely no relevance in my life. It sounds like, Yadda, yadda, yadda. Even when I listen, I don't get it. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: Encourage us in the valley, O God, that we might share your glory.

J: I'm 7-years-old and I love church! ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: Help us up the mountain, O God, that we might see your glory.

J: I'm in college home for the weekend. I've got lots of questions. I'm looking for clarity. I've got questions about life (like, Why do bad things happen to good people?), and I've got questions about what I ought to do with my major, a job, and general direction. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: Encourage us in the valley, O God, that we might share your glory.

J: If I live to be 86, I'm exactly in the middle of my life. I'm 43. *Forty-three!* I'm in the middle of raising two sons and two daughters. Sometimes I wonder if I'm going to run out of steam. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

J: Help us up the mountain, O God, that we might see your glory.

R: I'm 16 and I believe that sunsets and Holy Communion and a million other things are "miracles." As my grandmother was dying, I held her hand . . . or, was *she* holding *my* hand? It was so beautiful. I'm not afraid of the future. I'm eager to use my life helping others in the ways Jesus did. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

J: Help us up the mountain, O God, that we might see your glory.

R: I spent a week last summer in Montreat at the youth conferences. It was a mountain top experience. When I hear about Jesus on the mountain, and read about his face shining white like a sun, I believe it. I've seen it myself, right at the top of Lookout Mountain, soaked up in sun and wind and holy awe. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: Help us up the mountain, O God, that we might see your glory.

J: I'm 50 and I feel a lot of pressures about my family. My kids expect so much out of me. I drive them everywhere; they think I'm a taxi driver. They think I'm made of money. I'm a little afraid for their future. Will they cave into peer pressure and do foolish things that they know they shouldn't? I wonder if I've done a good job as a parent. I wonder if I've expected too much---or too little. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: I'm 80. I've got metal knees and a titanium hip ball. When I go through the metal detector at the airport it rings like a hand bell choir. Life is a trip! ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R/J: Help us up the mountain, O God, that we might see your glory.

J: I'm 6 and I look up to the big kids in church. I'm not sure they notice me, though. I wish they'd say "hi" every now and then. They're so cool. ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

R: I'm always so busy in my life. I feel like I'm in the spin cycle of a washing machine. I'm always a little dizzy. I'm working so hard to make a living that I wonder if I'm spending enough time actually *living*. Know what I mean? ***Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.***

PEOPLE: Alleluia.

J: I'm a junior in high school. I feel so much pressure to do well. In school. In church. In life. Give me just ONE BREAK. I need to breathe. *Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.*

PEOPLE: *Alleluia.*

R: God is with us on the Low Road and on the High; Alleluia!

J: Jesus invites us to the mountaintop, where the view allows a glimpse of eternity.

R: God is with us on the High Road and on the Low; Alleluia!

Thank you for hearing us, O Holy God.

PEOPLE: *Alleluia!*