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**Was Jesus' Suffering Necessary?**

Mark 8:31-38

Let's get to the question for today's sermon right away. Was Jesus' suffering necessary? Right here in the gospel of Mark, Jesus said, "The Son of Man must suffer." Question answered! Sermon over.

Okaaaaay, maybe not so fast! This is a opportunity for wondering, which I preached about last week. We can pause and wonder what it meant for Jesus to say he must suffer, to call himself the Son of Man, and what it meant when he said his followers are supposed to take up a cross when they choose to live as he did.

We don't know what the original words were that Jesus used – the Aramaic words, the inflection he used, the tone. In the English translation, the word, **MUST** carries a lot of weight. It is a requirement. You must do something, there are consequences if you don't. If you might do something, or you are invited, or if we are encouraged to do something, that has a flavor of choice. But Jesus said, the Son of Man must suffer. "Son of Man" is a title of authority that comes from the prophet Daniel. It means exalted human being. In a unique moment, Jesus claims for himself that he is exalted. And he reveals at the same time that there is a requirement that goes along with that exaltation: suffering.

Peter has a hard time with this, understandably. His understanding of those who are exalted is that they are endowed with an impermeable cloak of protection. Peter is indignant and clearly put-out by Jesus' pronouncement that this Son of Man will be exalted and humbled / lifted up, and tortured. It didn't make sense. What was Jesus talking about? Peter wanted to shut this down.

The gospel writer is not explicit about the way in which Peter rebuked Jesus. Did Peter take him aside and say, "Dude, you're not making any sense." Or

was it more like, “Shut up! No one is going to believe you or want to go ANYWHERE with you if you’re talking like that.” Or maybe, “Suffering? really? Why can’t you just tell us one of your parables, or an obscure paradox that we have to figure out. We’re not used to you being so direct.” We wonder if Peter scolded him, “Bad rabbi! Go up the mountain and think about what you are saying, then when you’re ready to comply with the status quo you can come down.”

Even though Peter rejected this idea of a suffering Messiah, there were others who were aligned with the necessity of suffering. After all, the prophet Isaiah, said that the Servant of God would have to suffer, and the suffering would be for the benefit of others to redeem their sinfulness.

Put yourself in those times – the Jewish people were accustomed to making sacrifices in the temple when there was wrongdoing. They sacrificed doves and lambs and rams and goats in order to regain favor with the God against whom they had transgressed. The innocent animals carried the sins of the people on their backs. Their deaths were exchanged for divine punishment by God. The suffering of the creatures of God paid a transcendent debt between the Creator and the sinner.

In that context, the idea of *one who has to suffer for the sins of others* makes a little more sense. If God wanted all debts paid off at once, if God wanted no barriers between divinity and humanity, there had to be a sacrifice so significant that everyone for all time would be forgiven. This reconciliation with the people would bring unending joy to God – a permanent solution to the problem of human beings’ inability to live peaceably with all. That significant sacrifice would have to be, let’s say, God’s own child. The favored child. The ONLY

child. God was willing to put that exalted life on the line in order to find a way to stay connected to all of humanity. Suffering is necessary. //

It is concerning, to say the least, that since we as a congregation are called the body of Christ, then we, too, must suffer. We become anxious that it is required that we have turmoil and pain in our congregation because of our identity as Christians. We wonder, is OUR suffering necessary?

Let's go back to the original conversation between Jesus and his disciples. The Greek translation, which is the closest we have to the original language used by Galileans, interprets "must" in another way. The word in the gospel of Mark can also be read, "inevitable." It is inevitable that the Son of Man will suffer.

That sheds a whole new light on Jesus' situation and ours. By saying suffering is inevitable, there is no longer an assumption that God *wills* suffering to happen, instead, it is a consequence of the life that is lived.

If suffering is inevitable, the framework of the story changes. For example, When someone comes into a situation and challenges the status quo, it is inevitable that he will suffer. When someone speaks the truth to a liar, she is going to suffer at the hands of the liar. When someone advocates for those who are oppressed, they are inevitably going to undergo pain on command of the oppressors. When someone teaches love to a group of people who want to take control by force, that person will be rejected. In our current congregational life There are challenges to the status quo (such as naming our overt and covert values which we will do today), people seeking to tell the truth (such as the complainants, Glenn, and the investigators), individuals advocating for those who don't have a voice, and disparate understandings of power and authority.

Do you see where this is going? Anyone who lives and acts as Jesus did – treating men AND women equally, welcoming children and elders, eating with lepers, drinking with families and outcasts, socializing with tax collectors and scribes alike – anyone who does these things will inevitably be rejected and suffer.

That is what Jesus meant when he said, “if you follow me, it will be like taking up a cross yourself. If you live as I do, it is inevitable that you are going to experience the pain of betrayal, abandonment, persecution and isolation.”

The *blessing* is that this is not the end of Jesus’ message. Jesus NEVER leaves us there in the valley of the shadow. He said very clearly that the Son of Man will undergo suffering and die... and will rise again after three days. That is also true for those who live and act as Jesus did. There is INEVITABLE resurrection when you and I welcome outsiders, speak out against injustice, take risks in advocating for the poor, align ourselves with the sick and sacrifice our own well-being for the good of others.

We talk about suffering during Lent because it is inextricably tied to Easter. The path of Christ - struggle, challenge, wondering, dealing with anxiety, and mending bridges - inevitably leads to rising again. We receive new life when we choose the way of righteousness and suffering, and in turn, we bring new life into the world as the risen body of Christ.

Amen.

### Mark 8:31-38

Then Jesus began to teach the disciples 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But 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."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."