

Didn't Sign Up for That

The gospel of Mark is the shortest of the gospel narratives. It begins with the adult Jesus going to John the Baptist, an event described in two verses. In the next four verses Mark describes the temptation of Jesus AND the arrest of John the Baptist which signals in Mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus goes to Galilee and begins his proclamation of the good news. And according to Mark that good news is that the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near. Then Mark describes the calling of four disciples, two sets of brothers whose occupation was a common one; they were fishermen. He calls them with these now famous words: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." In both cases, Mark uses one of his favorite words—immediately—to tell us that they left their nets and went with Jesus. In this description of their calling there is no explanation of what being fishers of people is going to involve. No outline of what following Jesus will look like. The Galilean countryside is the location of this portion of Jesus' proclamation. In their context the proclamation that the time is fulfilled resonates with the promise of a Messiah who will save them. As they follow Jesus into the synagogues and hear his teaching which is done with authority, as they see the powerful healings he does and witness miracles—it is easy to see why they stay with him. Today's text is recorded as Jesus and his disciples are on their way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. As they are walking along Jesus asks them a question: "Who do people say that I am?" This it turns out is rather like an opinion poll or survey. Jesus wants them to begin considering his identity—what does his message that the time has been fulfilled mean and how are people interpreting what he is saying and doing. The disciples' answers indicate that there is no one conclusion which has been reached. They report the answer is varied. "They answered him, John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." This is the first move which Jesus makes in the teaching of his disciples what they have signed up to do—the establishing of his identity and what that identity means for him—and also what it means for them. You might say that this is phase one to giving the disciples the "job description" of what Jesus has called them to do. That each of these answers represents someone sent by Yahweh to call the people to repentance, to bring them back into covenant relationship with God is consistent with their history and with the proclamation that Jesus has been making about the time being fulfilled. In the second move of this teaching session—Jesus then brings the question a little closer to them and more to the point of what they have been called to do. Then "He asked them, '*But WHO do YOU say that I am?*'" He is asking if these folks he has called to become "fishers of people" understand who he truly is. They have witnessed the actions of his ministry, so what do they now understand about him and his mission to the people of the world. Peter, the one who seems to always speak up first and most loudly has the answer. "Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." This is the right answer. Jesus acknowledges this correctness by telling them "sternly" not to tell anyone about him. But as the text continues, it is clear that what Peter declared is only a partial understanding of Jesus' identity. Peter is correct in identifying Jesus as the Messiah, but he has little or no clarity about what it means to be the Messiah. Peter, seeing the power that Jesus wields is focused on the fulfillment of the prophecy related to the Kingdom of God being a return of the control of the land to the people through the ascension

of a descendent of David to the throne. Peter, the other disciples and most of the population have been expecting, hoping for a Messiah who would drive out the nasty Romans and establish a new independent political Israel. They were looking for a Messiah who would create a geo-political reality in which they—Jesus’ disciples and followers would perhaps hold major offices. That’s the hope, the proposition, the job description that they have had in mind as they have witnessed what Jesus can do. What happens next does not fit into that plan at all. For then Jesus began to explain to them exactly what being the Messiah, being God’s anointed who will redeem the world actually means. Jesus tells them that’s not the Messiah he’s called to be. Rather, “Then 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.” The text says that “he said all this quite openly.” That doesn’t mean that he is announcing it to a large group, but that unlike the parables and other teachings, he says this so clearly that it cannot be misunderstood. The disciples don’t like hearing this vision of what it means to be a Messiah one little bit. Peter, again the spokesman for the group bluntly tells Jesus that they don’t like this at all. We are told: “And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” To this rebuke Jesus utters some very famous words, “Get behind me, Satan.”

That is to say, Peter, don’t tempt me to take the easy way.” This new understanding of the role of God’s anointed was hard for the disciples to hear, but what comes next is even more difficult. It is a real wake-up call about discipleship. It is something that was not only difficult for those disciples, but continues to be difficult for us. “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.’” Peter and the others who have followed Jesus around the Galilean countryside had not seen this coming—they had not seen it as part of their job description as followers of Jesus—they certainly had not signed up for the path that he now outlined for followers. Jesus says that the call he had to self-giving is not just for him, it’s for everyone who would follow him. That means you, disciples. There is no record of what Peter or any others said to this description of discipleship—deny yourselves in order to follow Jesus. The text tells us they continued to accompany Jesus—even if it is clear they didn’t understand what the sign up meant. Jesus goes on to say that “those who want to save their life will lose it, but that those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” This description of discipleship—this taking up of a cross—this denying of self—is not easy Christianity or what as one writer has described as “Christianity-lite”. However, this is the invitation that is inherent in the call to follow Jesus; to become his disciple. We face a temptation parallel to the one Peter set before Jesus—the temptation to take the easy way. The temptation to take a way where we wish to receive the grace God offers but do not want to stand up and follow the principles of love for others which Jesus taught so consistently. We are tempted by the world to a Christianity that would bypass sacrifice and self-giving. In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Christian, wrote what is probably his most famous book entitled “*The Cost of Discipleship*”. Chapter four of that book is a long meditation on this text from Mark which is our gospel passage for today. This quote was written some eight years before he was killed for his resistance to the regime of Adolf Hitler. “If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands...we have forgotten (what) the cross means...” Not all calls to

discipleship, not all of the crosses we are called to take up in Christ's name lead to martyrdom, but they do require some cost to us, some placing of others before our own self-interest. The call to discipleship means giving—sacrificial—giving of time, talent and resources to others. It means standing up and declaring the gospel truths that we are to love others—not just those like ourselves; that God desires justice and kindness to be the basis of the way we are in community with one another. This is counterintuitive for us...yet the truth is that it is actually through self-giving, in the making of sacrifices, by loving extravagantly that we find our way into the deepest life, the most fulfilled life, and often the most joyful life. It is those who look outward toward others that are often the most content with their own life. The counterintuitive, weird, and hard to hear truth is that life blooms as we grow into human beings who are willing to love, ready to serve and happy to give. It is in the growing in these ways that we become closer to the one we follow and find the abundant life we are promised. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.