

Job Title/Job Description
First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9
Second Reading: Mark 8:27-38

It may have escaped your notice, but for the last forty-odd years, the foundational piece of my wardrobe has been the stone-colored, cotton khaki. The pants have adapted periodically for style points — from pleated to flat-front to five-pocket. The brands have occasionally changed — from J. Crew to Polo to Tommy Bahama to Daniel Cremieux. Yet, from the bottom of my robe to the top of my shoe, that's typically what you're going to see. Why? I don't know. I like them. I've probably worn out 8 to 10 irons and 4 or 5 ironing boards pressing them each night, along with a cotton button-down. Even thirty years ago, I heard church members referring to them as "Matt pants." And, as you might guess, like all other pants, stone-colored khakis have a life cycle — the cuff starts turning into fringe; the grape-juice stain that's gonna be noticed; the awkward landing spot of the grease stain that sends them immediately to the recycle bin; the waist gets a bit snug (certainly from shrinking, right?).

However,, very often, there is that slice of the life cycle where the pants are too worn for the office and definitely taboo at the wedding, yet still wearable for slumming around or working in the yard. Yet, when I

showed up in a pair for the first day of a mission trip, my fellow team members thought I had lost my mind (which I find to be a fairly regular occurrence). *You're mighty dressed up for a work day. You're going to ruin your nice white pants.*

However, for reasons stated above, these are exactly the pants I would wear for yard work or for mission trip work whatever that would be. This was the last gasp of life for these pants, the last train stop on their way to the landfill. I didn't mind if my pants got a little dirty, yet admittedly I didn't think they would get **that** dirty. This job would not be what I expected.

If you have ever joined a disaster assistance mission team, you typically don't know what kind of work you are going to be doing until you arrive on site, and even then the tasks assigned may change without notice. It could be painting, moving furniture, installing flooring, washing windows, or any number of tasks.

This particular mission team was going to do some disaster assistance work following a flash flood in the North Carolina mountains up around Bakersville on the slopes of Roan Mountain, and our first job was moving furniture back into a house that had been flooded. We were a little bit at

loose ends when we finished that task pretty quickly, but before long the mission coordinator came by to tell us she had a big job for us. Our task was to dig a three foot trench and install a French drain around the back of a mountainside house that had flooded. Well, the team heard the word ditch and immediately started laughing and pointing at my crisply ironed stone colored khakis, and throughout the day they were entertained by the pants slow transformation from nearly white to the rust-colored red of North Carolina clay. By day #3, those pants, which had been worn when baptizing babies and officiating weddings, were flat out nasty. And though this was some 25 years ago, if I was to visit that congregation, someone would say something about the preacher who showed up in a ditch dressed like he had reservations at the country club. It just wasn't the job I expected.

But life is like that, isn't it? You sign up and show up, but the reality is decidedly different than the expectation. You show up to take tickets at the musical, but are assigned to the stage crew moving theater sets in the dark. You grudgingly agree to be on a committee only to find out you'll be serving as chairperson. Armed with your new college degree, you show up for your first career-track job, but find yourself in a ditch laying cable for Google. If that's the case, I have a pair of pants for you.

There are times when the job title and the unwritten part of the job description bear little relation to each other. Sometimes the difference is something to which we can adapt, or through which we can thrive. Sometimes, the adjustment is more than we can bear. The difference can become our purpose or derail our hopes. Our text today places those two possibilities before us. Mark 8 offers up a significant turning point for Mark's Gospel. Jesus has been touring around Galilee calling disciples, healing the sick, freeing tormented spirits, teaching and feeding the crowds, speaking in parables. Today, the journey of Jesus and the disciples finds them visiting the villages of Caesarea Philippi, 25-30 miles north of the sea of Galilee at the base of the snow-capped peaks of Mt. Hermon. This historic mountain served as the northern border of the promised land, and would be the site of Jesus' Transfiguration.

While they are walking, Mark tells us Jesus asked the disciples, "*Who do people say that I am?*" I don't know about you but that is a question I don't ask, though I sort of want to; a question I think I want to know the answer to, and yet remain hesitant, fearing I'll be disheartened by the answer I receive. Do I want to know? Do I not want to know? I do not know.

“Who do people say that I am?” I think it safe to assume there was no shortage of thoughts on that. Jesus had quickly risen as a public figure in Galilee, preaching and teaching before thousands, and Lord knows, you don’t cure the blind or walk on water without getting people to talk about you.

“Who do people say that I am?” The question is ironic, really, because Jesus expends a lot of effort in Mark, telling people not to say anything about him. He heals a deaf man, and Jesus is all like — *Now don’t tell anyone. It’ll be our little secret*, and as you know, nothing sets the lips to flapping like the plea to *keep it on the down-low, put it in the vault, don’t tell anyone else*. So, instead of silence, you get a broadcast; instead of *hush, hush*, you get *Do tell, Do tell*. It makes you wonder if Jesus was pushing secrecy because he knew that would make the good news travel that much faster. Actually, though, the reason for the attempt at secrecy in Mark, what scholars call The Messianic Secret, was based on the idea that Jesus knew the people could not come to understand the purpose of the incarnation, or the full identity of Jesus until the events of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

Whatever was the rationale for Mark’s literary choice, there can be little doubt that the people of Galilee were talking a lot about the itinerant preacher from Nazareth. “*Who do people say that I am?*” And the disciples report — “*John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.*” The polls are saying that Jesus is next up to bat in the long line of prophets from Moses to Malachi. Of note, is the connection between John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Following his hotrod chariot trip to heaven, the tradition arose that Elijah would return as the messenger proclaiming the coming of God’s reign on earth. In Mark’s story of Jesus’ transfiguration, it is Elijah who appears on Mount Hermon, along with Moses, standing next to Jesus. And following this, Jesus identifies John the Baptist as Elijah.

In spite of the Messianic Secret, the people are talking. Everybody’s got an opinion, has an idea. Thank the Lord social media hadn’t arrived or there would have been more conspiracy theories than cowboy boots at a George Strait concert. People are talking. They are spreading rumors. So, Jesus puts the question directly to the disciples — “*But who do you say that I am?*”

Peter, remembered for his boldness, ambivalence, and ultimately, his leadership, steps up to the plate and takes a swing at Christ's question — “*You are the Messiah.*” Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Release the confetti, blow the trumpets, Peter's a winner. It's like those moments on *Jeopardy*, when just before the buzzer, a confused, clearly clueless contestant desperately spurts out an answer, any answer, which miraculously turns out to be the right answer. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus practically gushes over Peter's answer, saying, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...*”

Yet, that is not what we get in Mark. Rather than praising Peter, or even acknowledging he gave the right answer, Jesus shuts him down — “*And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*” What a buzzkill. In Matthew, Peter gets the keys to the kingdom, but that's not what we hear in Mark.

Well, Jesus, tell Peter what he has won. Peter, you and your companions will be ushered to the nearest roadway, and there you will begin a long 100

mile hike toward Jerusalem where the crowds will transform from inspired to angry. Your leader will be arrested, beaten, tried, and crucified, and you'll be looking for the nearest hiding place!

Peter is questioning why he signed up for this game show. This is not what he expected or wanted. So, Peter, feeling a bit cocky after guessing the right answer, pulls Jesus aside, and says something like, *Listen, I think there has been some kind of mistake here. I think this is where the announcer is supposed to tell me we'll be riding to Jerusalem in a golden chariot and we'll have adjoining rooms in your royal palace.*

Suffering? Rejection? Execution? This is not what Peter expected. I can't think of anyone who would see that journey as a prize for giving the right answer. And if that's not enough, Jesus berates him for his equivocation. *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* Not even Simon Cowell would say that to the winning contestant.

However, Mark is offering an incisive perspective on what means to follow Jesus. Think about it — *Get behind me* — Jesus is challenging Peter with the question of who is to follow who when it comes to hanging out

with Jesus. You can't answer the call to discipleship, and then tell the Lord how to do the Lord's job. Discipleship is not about getting Jesus to meet our expectations, but rather, discipleship is about the molding of our lives toward Jesus' expectations — *Not my will, but Thy will be done.*

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Brian Zahnd has come to understand this later in life, even though he signed up to be a follower of Jesus some 45 years ago. At a college youth rally in St. Joseph, Missouri, Zahnd dedicated his life to Christ and became a self-proclaimed Jesus freak, an outgrowth of the charismatic Jesus movement on college campuses in the late 1960s and 70s. In 1981, Zahnd started a church in St. Joe called Word of Life. He was 22 years-old and had no theological training. Yet, with Zahnd's charisma and the infusion of rock-based music, the tools that would become central to the emergence of megachurches, Word of Life became a sensation. It exploded in size and influence. Zahnd says, “By the metrics that Americans use to measure success in ministry, we had achieved it all. People. Money. Power.”

Yet, by the turn of the century, he began to sense that something wasn't right. It was heavy on style and the trappings of success, but it all

began to seem superficial, theologically thin, politically skewed, consumeristic. Despite his earthly success, he felt empty. Zahnd says, “I just came to the conclusion that Jesus deserves a better Christianity than this. And I needed to go looking for it.” With no prior formal theological training, he dove into the deep end — the early church theologians — Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus. After this, he began to read the scholarly heavyweights — Walter Brueggemann, N.T. Wright, Stanley Hauerwas.

Through his study, Zahnd began to see how his church, and the evangelical movement itself, was drifting toward nationalism and away from the life witness and message of Jesus. When asked to pray at a political rally, he sensed God asking him, “Brian, Brian, why are you politicizing me?”

He told his congregation they would be changing their focus. He says, “I began to critique the American empire as not a kind of biblical Israel, but a kind of biblical Babylon.” (Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory*) He began to talk more and more about Jesus, and less and less about the politically charged tenets of the culture wars.

Life and the church have certainly changed. It is not the church Zahnd had long ago envisioned, but it is the church he now loves. He is no longer welcome in the megachurch fraternity. Zahnd is no longer defined by numbers but by faithfulness to the Jesus of the Gospels. He is no longer invited to chaperone political luminaries, but now pastors and Christ followers are coming to him to learn — not about how to make the church grow, but how the church can be more faithful. May that always be our aim. It won't be what you expected, yet, it will mean so much more. *“For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”* Amen.