

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Sunday, September 13, 2015  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*What Kind of Messiah do we want?*

In today's text from Proverbs, we are presented with a different kind of image of God. First of all the image of God as Wisdom is presented as a woman. Wisdom is not only still speaking, but cries out, raises her voice in the town square, in the busiest corners of our lives. And yet, Wisdom states that we will not heed her words. She has grown weary of those not listening to her cries. She even threatens to not respond the next time we seek her out to hear her voice. Yet our text ends with the promise: "those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease". Scholars suggest that the author of Proverbs tends to present the extremes. It is not that no one ever has listened and it is not that those who listen will always live a life of ease. But God does call us to listen for Wisdom in all aspects of our lives.

Biblical Commentator, Kenneth H. Carter Jr., says, "*Listening in the Proverbs is always linked to obedience, and obedience is participation in the practices that lead to wisdom. This wisdom has very little to do with knowledge in service of power, and more to do with insight that is in service of God and neighbor.*"<sup>1</sup> Proverbs teaches us that rather than asserting God's power to make our lives free from oppression, free from suffering and free from responsibility, God calls us to service. This was true in the Old Testament times, in New Testament times, and in our time today. Are we, today, ready to listen?

In today's text from Mark Jesus begins by collecting some feedback from the disciples. He asks them – paraphrasing his question - "What is the word on the street? When you check your Facebook news feed, how do the people refer to me?" Hearing that he was referred to as John the Baptist, Elijah or just one of the prophets, I can imagine Jesus feeling that the people were not really recognizing him as God incarnate, as the Promised One from God. I can imagine Jesus then deciding to "lay it on the line". He asks his disciples, "But who do you say that I am? Peter seemingly came up with the correct answer when he responded: "You are the Messiah". Yet, again, Jesus offers shocking words.

Biblical Commentator, Harry B. Adams, describes what follows Peter's correct answer in this way: "*... in this exchange with Peter and the other disciples, Jesus says a rather strange thing: "he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (v. 30). Why not? Why not tell others about him? There may be reasons we do not understand why Jesus admonishes his disciples so strongly to keep quiet about him, but the subsequent conversation with Peter suggests at least one reason. It comes clear that when Peter calls him the Messiah, he may have the right title but the wrong understanding of what the title means for Jesus. When Jesus declares "quite openly" that he is going to suffer and be rejected and be killed, Peter does not*

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Proverbs 17-Reign of Christ).

want to hear that. One wonders if Peter even hears the last part of Jesus' statement, the part about rising after three days. Peter does not want to hear about a suffering Messiah. He apparently is looking for a Messiah who will establish God's rule with power and authority, and who will bring God's followers glory and reward."<sup>2</sup>

The shocking part of this conversation is that Jesus declares for the first time that the Promised One 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. Peter, seemingly the spokesperson for the group, takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke Jesus for these teaching. We can imagine Peter saying, *"Jesus, this would be utter failure for you to suffer and die. This isn't what we signed up for. Surely we can figure out a way to make this not happen. We have seen you have power over demons, perform healing miracles, confront the Jewish leaders with new teachings. Surely you won't have to succumb to suffering, rejection and death. We just can't let this happen. Come-on, give this a second thought just like you re-thought your response to the Syrophonecian woman. Surely, if we work together, we can figure out a better ending to this story."*

Rather than Jesus reconsidering his teachings, however, Jesus now rebukes Peter in a most forceful way by saying, *"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* It was not sufficient for Jesus to speak this way to Peter and openly to all his disciples, he now calls over others in the crowd and tell 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."*

So, what do we, today, make of Jesus having to suffer, be rejected and die? What kind of Messiah do we want? What do we make of Jesus asking us to pick up our cross and follow him? What do we make of Jesus telling us that that the only way we can save our life is if we lose it for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of the gospel? As commentator Adams, says Peter seems not even to have heard Jesus' words *"and after three days rise again"*. We do not live in a post-crucifixion world, we live in a post-resurrection world but do we know what kind of Messiah we want today? Do we still hold on to wanting, like Peter, a Messiah who will establish God's rule with power and authority, and who will bring God's followers glory and reward.

Theologian, Micah D. Kiel says, *"Jesus does not suffer and die because suffering is good. The necessity of the suffering comes from the way Jesus lives -- a series of actions that pay no heed to social and religious norms, a life that reaches out to those who are ostracized (Mark 5:1-20), unclean (Mark 5:21-43), or marginalized (Mark 7:24-30). Mark has already profiled this suffering in the story of John the Baptist's death in chapter 6. John is arrested and dies because he ran afoul of those in power (Mark 6:18). Suffering that results from the ways that God's*

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

*kingdom does not comport with human dominion is very different from prescribing suffering for its own sake.”<sup>3</sup>*

I firmly agree with Micah Kiel, that Jesus is not calling us to suffer because suffering is somehow good and brings us closer to God. Much harm has been done throughout the history of the church when suffering has been glorified in this manner. As Kiel suggests, suffering occurs because when we seek to follow Jesus, we are placed at odds with those who are in power; we are placed at odds with our culture that values competition over cooperation; we are placed at odds with those who treat “the other” as different and of lesser value than those who are like us; we are placed at odds with those who are indifferent to the needs of those less fortunate; we are placed at odds with those who neglect and abuse God’s creation for personal gain; we are placed at odds with those who amass wealth and use it to propagate unjust social structures; the list could go on and on.

Micah Kiel continues with these pertinent insights. He says, *“Mark profiles a deeper dynamic that spans the ages: how are human knowledge and expectations in tension with the aims of God? If we believe God is active and that Jesus is alive in the world, then the question posed to us is not whether we confess Jesus as the Messiah. That is the easy part. We know what the title is. The question becomes how do we misunderstand what the title means? How do our expectations not align with God’s?”<sup>4</sup>*

I believe these questions are relevant for Edina Morningside Church today. As we begin this fall to identify the specific goals that we want to claim for “living in” to the vision of this faith community, we must ask where do our expectations align with God’s. Are we listening to the voice of Wisdom? What does God want for this community? Who is God calling us to become? How do we know that we are living according to God’s ways and not our own? These are vital questions to be answered as we begin our search for our next settled pastor. As the pastoral search committee, whom we have commissioned today, writes our church profile to attract the kind of person who can offer pastoral guidance for this community into a vital future, we need to not expect our new pastor to be a messiah who will lead us with power and authority, but rather will be a servant leader seeking to help this faith community live into your own vision and mission. Before calling this pastor, we need to be clear about how we understand God to be calling us to live into our vision and mission. This is truly an exciting time that God is calling us into. May we be prepared to courageously follow the way of Jesus wherever God leads us. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2621](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2621)

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