



Altering History + Mark 8:31-38
Lent 2, February 25, 2024
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

A TV show that Bill and I used to watch is called "For All Mankind." The concept gives us an altered narrative of

American history that imagines what might have been if we had come out of the Vietnam war to devote ourselves relentlessly to the space race. How might the vigorous and successful exploration of space across the decades have changed America's trajectory?

[Moon slide] In the seasons that we watched, it was a wild ride. Women take center stage as a female astronaut discovers water on the moon. Another is elected to the Senate, goes on to defeat Bill Clinton and then comes out as gay, making her the nation's first female and LGBTQ+ president.

Other aspects of altered history were just fun. Ted Kennedy cancels his trip to Chappaquiddick Island and goes on to defeat Nixon in 1972. John Lennon lives and the Beatles are reunited. Michael Jordan is drafted by the Portland Trailblazers. Margaret Thatcher is killed by the IRA. Gary Hart wins election with Al Gore as his vice president. Gore goes on to defeat Bush in 2000 and wrongly takes credit for the discovery of valuable asteroid, thereby sparking a major international controversy. (I heard that the writers do not like Al Gore.) [MARS slide] America and Russia rush to colonize Mars. The space race jumpstarts technological innovations that in reality took decades to develop. And lots more. [LENT]

One way to see what's happening here in Mark is that Peter, in rebuking Jesus, is trying to create an altered history for events that have not yet unfolded. Why would this be an altered history? Because Jesus knows what *must* happen. God's plan for the salvation of the world is already set.

No attempt by Peter to convince Jesus to take a different path can change what God has ordained must happen. Jesus knows this. A rich range of texts informed his understanding of his messianic vocation, but perhaps none better than the Suffering Servant in Isaiah [SLIDE] and especially this verse in Isaiah 53: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Let's see it from Peter's perspective for moment. We have to keep in mind that, here in Mark, Peter's hotheaded rebuke comes right after he had triumphantly confirmed Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Just before today's reading, we hear:

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." [LENT]

How could Peter possibly reconcile this with what Jesus then went on to tell the disciples about his coming suffering and death? In their understanding, the Messiah was to be a new Moses who would deliver the people from the oppression of Roman rule. The Messiah would bind them together in a new covenant in which they would free to worship the one true God without fear.

The Messiah therefore could not be rejected. The Messiah could not suffer and die, at least anytime soon, because he needed to accomplish all this first.

Two important things about this tense exchange between Jesus and Peter. First, the impetuosity of Peter's rebuke of Jesus suggests that what Jesus is telling the disciples about his death was totally new to them. They were completely unprepared to hear it. A rejected Messiah was unthinkable.

Second, the sharpness of Jesus' rebuke of Peter announced that Jesus was taking an uncompromising stand against the prospect that Peter was trying to tempt him with.

Matthew's version puts words in Peter's mouth. There he exclaims to Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!" Whatever words he actually spoke, the effect was to try to turn Jesus away from his calling, to abandon his mission, or maybe even – if it came to that – for Jesus to use his power as the Son of God to come down from the cross and walk away, which of course the very temptation that Satan tried to use on Jesus at the end of his 40 days in the wilderness.

That is why Jesus brands Peter as Satan, because he recognizes this temptation for exactly what it is. "But hey," you might be thinking, "that's kind of harsh. Peter was a nice guy, just trying to do what he thought was best."

Here is where we come in. [SLIDE] Satan is always hovering just off our left shoulder. He never leaves. When we weaken, he lands right there and begins whispering into our ear in a way that tricks us into thinking that these are *our* thoughts.

Remember from last week how Satan was playing God with Jesus the wilderness, trying to get Jesus to be obedient to him instead? Unwittingly, Peter is doing the same here. This is why Jesus must rebuke him – so that Peter returns to his vocation as a disciple. [LENT]

Peter's experience here suggests that even when we think we have grasped something about Jesus in one circumstance, we fail to see him clearly in another. Contrary to the hymn "Amazing Grace," we will never completely come out of blindness. We will never see fully until we arrive face to face with Jesus himself.

Until then it is our vocation to learn who Jesus is, little by little, and to glimpse the true nature of our discipleship, little by little, by being corrected and even at times rebuked by God. Who among us has not thought we had the perfect answer to a dilemma, and plunged blindly ahead without stopping to listen for God's voice -- only to find our plan crash and burn at the other end, as we look back at the ashes and say, "What was I THINKING?"

And yet, just as with Peter, there is always grace. We are not cast out for our missteps. Jesus is always extending the invitation to us to follow, full of faith and hope and love. From the hymn we're about to sing: "Let us do our Savior's bidding; Faithful Lord, with me abide; I shall follow where you guide."

Amen.