

March 1, 2015, Second Sunday in Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 8:31-38

Spoiler Alert

Please don't tell me what's going to happen on that television series, I'm still catching up. There are hints everywhere, but I'm trying not to know the ending, and I'll be really upset if you tell me. Whether it's a TV series, or a movie, or a book, you know this concern I have, this sense that someone will ruin it for you if they tell you the ending—particularly if it's a surprise ending. The term for that, for when people do that, is a spoiler. You can tell from the term itself that spoilers are disliked, so much so that we demand that they come with a warning. Before giving an ending away, you better announce it's about to happen, you better give a spoiler alert.

Jesus does not do this in the gospel today. Without giving any kind of a warning, Jesus says how the gospel is going to end. Quite openly, the gospel says. As one does when one hears a spoiler, Peter gets upset.

Now I recognize how ridiculous it is to make a comparison with what Jesus says and a spoiler to a TV show. This comparison is so off, it assumes parity for things that are on such different levels, that I'm reluctant to make it—except that it gives me another angle into this gospel reading. It helps it make at least a little more sense, because I have to admit that this story is hard, and in many ways doesn't really register with me. Part of this may be because I've heard it numerous times. In fact, today is just the first of three times that Jesus announces or foretells his death in the gospel. Maybe the repetition dulls its effect, and so I don't get the full impact of what Jesus is actually saying and so also the strength of Peter's reaction. But if I think for a minute about all the time Peter had invested, all the episodes he and Jesus have been through, the eagerness and expectation Peter must have for the finale, if I think of that, and then hear Jesus, I get the emotional, visceral disappointment that leads Peter to even rebuke Jesus. What Jesus says sounds like a colossal spoiler! Of course Peter would not want to hear it!

Not that there haven't been hints. Not that what Jesus says should come as a total surprise. In the plot of the gospel up to this point, seems like wherever Jesus goes he is stirring things up: healing on the Sabbath and teaching with an authority unlike the scribes; forgiving sins, when that's something that God does, upsetting the order of things as they are by casting out demons and crossing boundaries of all kinds. Now, halfway through Mark's gospel, it should be clear that it's heading for a final confrontation. Jesus knows that, and Jesus knows that that confrontation will include suffering, and rejection, and death. Jesus knew the ending. And he tells it, quite openly, to Peter and the disciples.

Then, when Peter gets upset, Jesus tells it to even more people. Jesus calls the crowd and tells them all, too—which is to say, Jesus tells the ending to anyone listening to this story, that is, to all of us, too. Jesus says that we will have to take up our cross, and lose our life. This is upsetting—on many levels. At the very least, it seems to ruin the story, like any spoiler would.

Except that spoilers don't ruin stories—so holds a recent study. According to an experiment published in the *Journal Psychological Science*, knowing the ending doesn't ruin a story, it enhances it. In this study, scientists asked 900 college students to read stories, some with "spoiler paragraphs" and some without any, and then rate the experience. Turned out the students rated their enjoyment of the story higher when they knew the endings. The researchers concluded, "Subjects significantly preferred spoiled over unspoiled stories."

Here's the strength of my aversion to spoilers, I'm not sure I believe that study.

But I do believe Jesus. I believe what Jesus says in the gospel today is crucial—crucial

for understanding the story of the gospel, and for understanding the story of our life. For, as Jesus says, knowing the ending does not ruin our life, it saves it. Knowing the ending increases our joy, enhances our existence, heightens our experience, because knowing the ending, you can live differently.

How might you live your life differently, knowing the ending? I read studies about this, too, studies that follow hundreds and thousands of people over decades, a lifetime, looking back at the course of their lives, measuring their physical, mental, and emotional health and asking them questions. It will come as no surprise to hear what these studies find. They find that a full and fulfilling life doesn't come from buying more things, or from doing a job you hate, or from worrying. They probably didn't need to do studies to determine that.

Instead, studies say, the two things that most contribute to a long and healthy life are: 1) having significant personal relationships, and 2) helping others. And, in fact, the two, relationships and helping, are related. In fact, in one study the researchers found that the two were related in a surprising way: it wasn't that relationships were good because those studied had someone to count on, someone to go to when times were tough. It wasn't getting help from others that conferred a long and happy life. It was *giving* help to others. Serving, giving, dare I say losing your life, actually lengthens, enhances, fulfills, saves your life.

Again, I'm somewhat reluctant in this comparison, this placing secular research alongside the gospel, except that it too gives me another angle into it. Moreover, it just seems so unsurprising to me that these two values of relationships and helping, these two values of community and service, these two values of mutual love and sacrificial giving—these two values which are so clearly articulated by Christian faith—happen to emerge as indicators of well-being in the findings of social research.

Of course, such studies may be entertaining, but they're something of a soft science. You and I know that in the end, the hard facts of life must be met with something more: with the truth that is faith, that is the cross. In the cross, we have an insight and a wisdom, in the cross we have a guide and a goal, in the cross we have a perfecter and a pioneer that can and will sustain us through life, through all of life, including when life is so very hard.

When Jesus announced that he must undergo great suffering and rejection and death, though it sounded God-awful, it wasn't a spoiler, it wasn't a surprise. Jesus wasn't saying anything we don't already know about what life includes. We all already know that life includes rejection. We all already know that life includes a fair dose of pain—for some life includes so much more than a fair dose of pain. And we all know that one day every one of us must die. Being a follower of Christ includes acknowledgement of all of these, as Jesus acknowledges when he announces the ending.

But then Jesus announces yet another ending. After three days he will rise again. In the end, God will put an end to all suffering, God will conquer even death. Jesus says that the end of his story is victory, and that this can be our story, too. Jesus invites us into this story, to lose our life for the gospel, and so find it, to live differently, because we know the ending.

Jesus knew the ending. On the cross, Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It's a cry of utter pain and abandonment; it's the first verse of Psalm 22. As that psalm continues, it describes the suffering Jesus undergoes: scorned and mocked, encircled, wasting away, dry-mouthed, people dividing his clothing and casting lots. All of those are included in Psalm 22. So is a surprise ending—which Jesus well knew. We know it, too. We sang it today. Psalm 22 ends, praising God for deliverance from affliction. Psalm 22 ends, calling all the ends of the earth to worship. Psalm 22 ends with a cry of victory, announcing God's deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying to you and to me, The Lord has acted!