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Epiphany Lutheran Church (Springboro)
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Texts: Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Galatians 3:7-14; Mark 8:22-30

Who Can Say “Jesus is Lord?”

“Ssshhhhhh! I have some really great news, but don’t tell anyone.” How often do you hear a statement like that? Probably not very often, because the fact is we like to tell others good news and others like to hear it. When I received the exciting news that the University of Dayton accepted me into their PhD program with funding, I had to tell as many people as possible. I called my wife, Corrie, while she was teaching school. I called both my parents in the middle of their work day. I even ran across the campus of my seminary to tell one of my professors, who was also a good friend. Good news is rarely kept a secret. We are more likely to be secretive with bad news in order to protect others or more likely to protect ourselves. And while it may be true that bad news travels faster than good, good news is usually more public than bad, because we talk about good news openly with each other instead of gossiping and whispering bad news into someone’s ear.

This morning I want to let you in on a secret, and it’s a good one. It’s good in multiple senses. First, it’s content is good news, and second it’s often a well kept secret that’s perplexed many, including myself. So, what is this secret? Scripture itself tells us what it is. In fact, the gospel of Mark strangely and persistently portrays Jesus as keeping this secret. Mark 1:23-26: ^{“23} Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by

an evil spirit cried out,²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"²⁶ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek." It happens again later in Mark 1. This time in verse 44, right after he heals a leper. Jesus said to the healed man, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." Later in chapter 4 Jesus says that his purpose for teaching in parables is to baffle his hearers, not to make his message clearer. In response to his disciples who asked about the parable of the sower, Jesus says, "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, so that they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand..." (4:11-12a). In Mark 7:36 Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone that he healed a deaf man. Perhaps the most puzzling instance of Jesus wanting to keep good news a secret happens in Mark 8, which we read this morning. Here Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, only to have Jesus warn him and the rest of the disciples to not tell anyone.

What on earth could this possibly mean? I mean, seriously, why does Jesus instruct folks NOT to tell others about all the great things he's doing and who he is? Why does he want his life and ministry to be kept a secret? That Jesus is Lord and the Messiah seems like something everyone should know about. I know I sure would want to tell others about demons being cast out, deaf people hearing, and blind people seeing. Most

certainly, if I were a Jew in the first century I would want to tell others that the Messiah God had been promising to send was finally here. In the entire course of history, this is the best news ever to come: God has kept his promise; he has come to be with us and save us. Yet, Jesus wants it kept a secret.

I use the gospel of Mark in my introduction to theology class at UD and one of the most asked questions (second only to “why is Jesus not very nice in Mark?”) by students is precisely this. Why would Jesus want to keep his identity a secret? It’s a great question. Why does Jesus want to keep himself and his work a secret?

I think this perplexes us, because we are starting with the wrong question. The question we should begin with is, “Who can say Jesus is Lord?” Is there anyone who identifies Jesus and does not get rebuked or warned in Mark?” Every instance where Jesus is rightly identified comes with an admonition: the demon, the deaf man, a leper, and Simon Peter are all told to be quiet. However, there is one person in Mark who truthfully identifies Jesus but is not warned or rebuked. It’s the pagan, gentile Roman centurion at the foot of the cross. Mark 15:39 says, “And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" Mark only mentions this one person who gets to say who Jesus is without a warning or rebuke, and it happens only when Jesus is dead. Think about that for a moment. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is only truthfully and publically identified without qualification when the Messiah, the Lord of all creation, is dead and hanging on a cross.

Now, you might be thinking, "Of course there is no warning or rebuke by Jesus, because he's dead and dead people can't speak." And that's exactly Mark's point. In Mark, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, because he was the one who died and was raised to life. Mark will not let us understand Jesus' life and ministry without taking the cross into account and making it central for how we understand Jesus and the nature of God. Martin Luther's spiritual advisor Johann von Staupitz understood this truth when he was comforting the young Luther who was struggling with God's grace. Staupitz told Luther to look to the cross to find God's grace; to see who God really is.

Paul also echoes that Christ's death and his identity cannot be separated as we learn from our text in Galatians 3. We Lutherans know all about Galatians and justification by grace through faith, but what we cannot forget the inextricable and internal linkage between justification and Christ's death as portrayed in the gospels, which Paul begins with in chapter 3. Paul argues that we are justified by grace through faith, because Jesus was cursed and outside the law, the law of Moses to be exact. Listen to verses 11-14 (RSV) again: 11 "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "He who through faith is righteous shall live"; 12 but the law does not rest on faith, for "He who does them shall live by them." 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree" -- 14 that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." In other words,

Paul is saying that this Jew, Jesus, is the Messiah, and his death gives us life, because, as our reading from Deuteronomy states, Jesus found himself to be cursed and outside the Mosaic law being crucified on a tree. So, a Jew outside the Mosaic law fulfilled that law, according to Paul. Paul comes to realize that God promised to save the world through Abraham's offspring and since Abraham comes centuries before Moses, Abraham didn't have the Mosaic law. God justified Abraham by faith apart from keeping Torah, because the OT law didn't even exist yet. Jesus is Abraham's ultimate descendent and fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to be blessing to all nations. Therefore, faith is what matters, not circumcision or the keeping of the Mosaic covenant. But, what is faith and what does it look like?

In a word, Jesus, and this is why Jesus and Mark do not let us call Jesus the Messiah or Lord before Christ's death, because Jesus hadn't completed his own life of obedience to the Father. Like Abraham, Jesus left his homeland and journeyed through life in obedience to God's commands. Jesus had a faith that knows no limits to its obedience, not even the limit of death, and Mark wants to make sure we don't understand Jesus' life and ministry as separate from his death. He wants us to take the whole story seriously and not just pick and choose the stuff we like about Jesus.

Sometimes when we leave out or miss an important detail of a story the whole story changes and we see the situation in a new light. In a previous ministry experience, I was working on an outreach project to an impoverished neighborhood with some

members of our church. At one point, a member of our ministry team accidentally offended one of the others on that team without even knowing it. As the weeks passed, animosity between these two grew to the point where reconciliation needed to happen so we could continue to carry out our ministry effectively. In response, the pastor and I called a meeting with the two of them. After some discussion and a genuine apology from the offender, the offended would not accept it or extend forgiveness. The pastor and I couldn't believe it. We knew this person and were shocked at their apparent stubbornness and unchristian attitude. A couple weeks after this painful and largely unsuccessful meeting, the pastor and I learned that the stubborn gentleman was in the middle of a bitter divorce. His wife had repeatedly cheated on him even after he tried his hardest to reconcile with her. This knowledge changed my entire perspective on the situation. Suddenly, the circumstances came into crystal clear focus. After forgiving someone he trusted and knew well, this guy got burned, so why should he trust and forgive again, especially someone he didn't know that well? That one part of the story made the rest of it understandable. The same is true in Mark: the death of Jesus is the event that puts everything else into focus and gives it meaning. Mark doesn't want us to have only impaired vision—to only see a fuzzy world, like the blind man before his sight is fully restored. Mark wants us to understand everything about Jesus in light of his death on the cross. The death of Christ is the correct lens for blurry vision in Mark.

Death is an interesting and scary thing for us, because it marks the end of our lives on earth. But it also provides us a chance to reflect on life and how we might be remembered. How many of you have ever heard a negative or critical eulogy? Where people say something like, “I’m glad that so and so died because they were a horrible person.” Or to pick on myself, “I won’t miss Tim or his incessantly critical attitude and his condescending approach to everyone he met.” We only hope that words like that aren’t spoken about us after we pass. Rest assured, morbid pun intended, that no one will speak that way publicly of you, because in our culture it’s insensitive to say anything other than that the deceased was a good person, despite any contortions of the truth that saying that may require.

In our culture, death often marks a time where bad memories and vices are massaged into the ubiquitous category of “mistakes.” Truth is eschewed in favor of platitudes and “sensitivity.” For the gospel of Mark, however, death is where the truth is most clear and revealed. In our current liturgical season of Epiphany where we remember God’s revelation to us in Christ, Mark makes us look ahead to Lent and Good Friday. Mark reminds us that we can’t have it both ways. We don’t get to affirm all the fun and encouraging things about Jesus’ life, while forgetting the cross. We can’t simply cling to Christ’s miracles, his healings, and his words of encouragement. We must cling to those while standing in faith at the foot of the cross alongside the centurion.

So, what are we to do with the secret that the crucified and risen one is Lord? In short, we must imitate Jesus' faithful obedience regardless of consequence. We must recognize that the call of discipleship may be costly as it obviously was for Jesus. However true this may be; it's still rather vague and general. Again, what does it look like for us, we want to ask?

When I was first preparing this sermon, at this point I wanted to show how our ordinary lives might look if we took Christ's death seriously, like Mark wants us to. After much thought, prayer and rereading of Mark, I came to the conclusion that perhaps giving specific techniques or things to do this week to practice faithfulness might not be the point of Mark's gospel. I know it sounds very strange and perhaps flat out wrong to say that it would be inappropriate for a sermon to have easy and practical suggestions for one to put into immediate practice, but bear with me and hear me out.

Jesus' identity is kept a secret in Mark until the very end of the story where a gentile man marvels at what he just witnessed. Jesus is finally identified by a pagan centurion staring at a dead body. There is a great mystery here and we should not impatiently look past it, because Mark has patiently waited until this point to let us know who God is and what he is like. And I think this is why Mark wants to keep Jesus a secret; to give us pause and to make us take in the truth of a crucified Lord before we proclaim it around the world, which we are called to do. Mark knows it's easier to do stuff with truth

and tell others what to do with it, than to let it shape us and seek to understand it in all its magnitude and beauty.

Perhaps what we need to learn from Mark and Jesus is the patience to sit and stare at the crucified Christ marveling in its morbid beauty and see that God loves us so much. In a time where culture wars rage and patience is in short supply, Mark's message is to make sure we get Jesus right and understand that God is the one who suffers with us and for us and that we are called to do the same. Mark's challenge to us is to stop and look; look at the crucified Lord of creation; take in the sight of what the centurion saw, even if we don't like it, because that's the truth; that a crucified King rules our world and rules heaven.

Please don't misunderstand me here; there are lots of things Christians must do and should be doing, and Mark knows that. He simply wants us to pause and take in the truth, contemplate it, and let it shape us down to the core--a very fitting call in the liturgical season of Epiphany and for our church that we call Epiphany. While there are times for rebuke and prophetic warning, we cannot have them without the cross. In other words, if you want to rebuke, you must be prepared to be obedient through to the end—an obedience that is willing to suffer, even unjustly, like Jesus. We don't get to pick parts of Jesus' life that we like whether that be the upbeat miracles and healings or the stern rebukes and harsh words to the Pharisees. No, we must take in all of Jesus' life and ministry and make sense of it in light of the sacrifice he accomplished for us while cursed

and as an outsider. Even though Jess was always right, he never lorded it over others; he chose to suffer instead. So, before we respond to others, before we judge or condemn, before we perform any and all of our actions, we must first look to the revelation of God on the cross, remember who God is, and allow that to shape all that we say and do. In the name of the One who is revealed on the cross, Amen.