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Pentecost 20B
Peace, Seattle
September 23, 2018
Mark 9:30-37

DEALING WITH FEAR

After a summer spent working on a yard gang for the Alaska RR, I rewarded myself with a trip to Denali National Park, where I looked forward to catching a glimpse of North America's highest peak, and exploring the backcountry.

My plan was simple: to hitch a ride on the bus that ferried tourists through the park, and to spend a couple nights trekking around Polychrome Pass.

But as the bus climbed the road from the forested campground near the park entrance to the vast rolling tundra of the park's interior, my plan quickly changed. For no sooner did I get off the bus than I spotted a mother grizzly bear and two cubs frolicking along the banks of the Toklat River a short distance away.

Suddenly, sleeping unprotected in the company of apex predators in the Alaskan wilderness wasn't so keen an idea. So when the lumbering bus made its way back toward civilization later that day, I made certain I was on it!

Fear comes in many different packages…
- There's the fear you feel when your life is under threat.
- And the fear you feel when someone you depended on is gone.
- There's the fear that comes when you've lost control of your life.
- And the fear you feel when you've messed up big-time and await the consequences.

Fear can paralyze us. It can make us to flee. It can shut us down. It can cause bad decisions. Whatever the particulars, being caught in the grip of fear is a horrible place to be.

And so I sympathize with the disciples in today's gospel, because I see myself in them.

"The Son of Man will be betrayed and killed, and after three days will rise again," Jesus told them. It was the second time he'd said where the road they were on was heading, and like the first, it did not compute.

Mark comments:
THEY DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT JESUS WAS SAYING AND WERE AFRAID TO ASK.

The twelve, in Mark's gospel, often come across as bumbling fools who never really catch on. At every turn they seem to be miles behind Jesus in their thinking. And when they try to catch on and fail, Jesus can quickly become exasperated. HOW MUCH LONGER MUST I PUT UP WITH YOU? he tells them in the story that immediately precedes this one. No wonder they were afraid to ask.

The other gospel writers are kinder in their portrayal of the twelve, but Mark pulls no punches. And maybe it's because the stakes are so high. After all, Mark is writing his story of Jesus at the time when the first Jewish War with the Romans has come to a head.

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The fear that accompanied Roman occupation had hovered over Israel for a century. Finally in 70AD, after decades of trying to tame and manage Jewish resistance the Empire struck back with a withering onslaught which saw the Temple destroyed and Jerusalem decimated.

Anything of value was taken, everything else was burned. The city of Zion emptied as people fled or were murdered in the process. Fields and vineyards were sown with salt, survivors were scattered, and prisoners, after being marched in chains back to Rome, were put to work building what would become the Empire's preeminent symbol of violent excess: The Colosseum.[1]

Mark writes his gospel to a beleaguered and marginalized community of Jewish Christians, who know what it's like to feel the boot of Rome on their necks; who know what it's like to live in fear.

No wonder Peter stopped his ears when he heard Jesus say THE MESSIAH MUST SUFFER. Really Jesus?! Haven't we suffered enough? GOD FORBID IT LORD! Peter shouts at him.

At the height of his popularity, with throngs of people following him, Jesus begins talking about his suffering and death. Yes, he mentions his rising too, but none of this teaching makes any sense to the Twelve. The proof of that is in what happens next.

When they arrive home in Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they'd been arguing about on the road—and the room goes quiet. For instead of talking about Jesus' deeds of healing, instead of trying to wrap their minds around his teaching, they had argued over which one of them was the greatest.

So he sits them down, pulls a child into his arms, and turning the dominant paradigm on its head, says:

> WHOEVER WANTS TO BE FIRST MUST BE LAST OF ALL AND SERVANT OF ALL.
> WHOEVER WELCOMES ONE SUCH CHILD WELCOMES ME,
> AND WHOEVER WELCOMES ME WELCOMES NOT ME BUT THE ONE WHO SENT ME.

This WAY they're on with Jesus is so contrary to how the world works, how cultures organize themselves, that it just doesn't make sense. **They don't get what he's saying, and are afraid to ask him.**

But quite apart from not wanting their teacher to get frustrated with them yet again, there is another reason for their fear: **What if what he's saying is true?** What if this road they're on should bring suffering and betrayal and death for them, too? Would it not be their worst nightmare coming true?

No wonder they're afraid to ask Jesus for the straight stuff on what all this means.

When I am called to duty as a chaplain with the Seattle Police Department (as I was on Friday when I sat down to begin writing this sermon) it means somebody has just died.

Though circumstances vary, it's pretty much a guarantee that the people I'm summoned to meet are experiencing the worst day of their lives; that their worst fears have come true.

When I'm en route to these scenes, I often have to tamp down my own fear—

[1] On the Titus Arch, which stands between the Colosseum and the Forum in Rome, carved figures of Jewish slaves in chains are depicted carrying booty from the Jerusalem Temple back to Rome. You can find out more at http://www.ancient.eu/article/499/

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- Fear that my presence will mean nothing, that my words will sound useless and hollow.
- Fear that nothing I bring will make the slightest bit of difference for them-.

It's a humbling journey each and every time.

I remind myself that my job is not to try and fix what is unfixable, but simply to be with them in their loss. A simple prayer helps to ground me: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

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There are a number of ways, I suppose, we could read the inflection of Jesus' voice as he questions the twelve after arriving in Capernaum.

On the one hand, we might imagine Jesus, exasperated, saying:
ALL RIGHT YOU NUMBSKULLS—WHAT WERE YOU ARGUING ABOUT THIS TIME?

On the other hand, we might hear Jesus heaving a heavy sigh like a frustrated parent and saying:
ARGH! HERE WE GO AGAIN. OK, WHAT WAS THE ARGUMENT ABOUT THIS TIME?

Either scenario is plausible. But this morning, I imagine Jesus operating from a different place.

Knowing full well what their argument on the way was about, he sits down, calls them close, and tells them in a different way than he's tried before what he's wanted them to know all along. And he does so with a little child.

Oh, they still don't get it—and won't, until long after his betrayal and crucifixion and resurrection. And even then comprehending what it means to walk the Way of Jesus—and then walking it—will continue to be a struggle for a long time; as it continues to be for us so many years later.

But that child in his arms is a beginning.

Every week we begin here again, listening—as if we haven't heard it before—to this story of a Savior whose love is so deep, so wide, so high, that he embraced death on a cross and after three days rose; listening for his voice saying, COME, FOLLOW ME.

After all that humanity—that we—have done through the centuries to deserve condemnation and death, God's message to us in Jesus remains:
I LOVE YOU STILL, I FORGIVE YOU. I'M NOT GIVING UP ON YOU.

As we gather at the Table, we eat and drink that assurance, and ingesting these visible words with the bread and wine, we find ourselves equipped once more to live this day—this one day—trusting that he is with us; trusting that we can live without fear.

Amen.