

Holy Lent: Holy Disappointment

Mark 8:27-38 & Exodus 32:9-14

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Several months ago, a friend of mine got laid off from his job. It was a good job, paid him well, definitely had its moments of frustration and big expectations. When he got laid off he was, of course, upset. Disappointed. Stressed out. He had worked hard there, and it was really other circumstances outside of his control that caused the company to have to lay off a lot of people. He had been between jobs before, and knew the stress and worry that would be facing him in the coming months. It was hardly any time—well, it seemed like hardly any time to me, though I'm sure it felt like a long time to him—but hardly any time later, he had an interview at a company that seemed promising. Sure enough, several other interviews followed, and he was offered the job. It's less money, but it's a company that he enjoys working for, and one where he feels like he fits in better. Just this week, he wrote me this message: "While I didn't think so at the time, the layoff was the best thing that happened for me and my career. Higher forces at work there..."

I suspect that anyone who is a human being has had similar feelings. Crushing disappointment, followed by a realization, almost always in hindsight, that what we thought was disappointment turned out to be a blessing. To be sure, not all disappointments are blessings. Some are just disappointments and are hard.

We can be disappointed in anything: situations, the weather, something we ordered online that doesn't live up to its picture. We can be disappointed in ourselves, disappointed by people we love, disappointed by God.

A surefire recipe for disappointment is when our expectations aren't met. We expect that fast food burger to look like the advertisement on tv, and when it doesn't—which is every single time we order it—we are disappointed. Because we trust the weather forecaster, we expect that today will be sunny and warm, and when it's instead sad and rainy, we are disappointed. We expect that our spouse or friend will know that we need them to just listen. And when they instead try to fix it, or dismiss it, or distract us, we are disappointed. We expect, to return my friend's situation, that we'll be in a job until we retire, and when we're laid off instead, we're disappointed. Expectations lead us to disappointment. We expect that if we are good people and come to church and pray and read our

Bibles that God will reward us, and then we're disappointed when we face difficulties. But I haven't figured out how not to have expectations. I think it's part of being human.

The Exodus passage that Beth read is full of disappointment, both divine and human. Moses has been to the mountaintop and seen God face to face. He's received the Law in all its details. Meanwhile, the Israelites had expected Moses to come down the mountain way sooner than this, and they are disappointed. They had expected that the Lord would have a word for them through Moses, and that Moses would deliver the word as soon as he got it, and they're still out in the wilderness and they'd like to be done with that. They're disappointed. And they build the golden calf, which God sees from the mountain, and God is, in turn, disappointed. God had expected better of them, and so had Moses. In extreme disappointment and anger, the Lord wants to destroy the people, and Moses—who is disappointed himself—has to intervene to save them. The story continues after we stopped reading, and Moses has his own anger and disappointment when he goes down the mountain and sees what the Israelites had done.

Turning to the other reading, which is the midpoint of Mark, really the turning point of Mark, Jesus asks them: Who do you say that I am? And Peter answers, "You're the Messiah." Peter was saying a whole lot with that. By this point in Israel's history, "Messiah" was a word loaded with expectations. New Testament scholar Matt Skinner paraphrases what Peter was saying with that short sentence: *"I think you're the one who will purify our society, reestablish Israel's supremacy among the nations, and usher in a new era of peace and holiness. I'm expecting big things from you."*¹ Those were Peter's expectations of what the Messiah would be. He wasn't alone. Israelites had developed this concept over the years, that the Messiah would be a powerful social and political savior, as well as a religious one.

Jesus knows that Messiah is a loaded term, weighed down with these expectations. So he begins to tell the disciples what he means by Messiah, by Son of God, by Son of Man. The Son of Man will suffer and be rejected and ultimately killed by people who had those powerful expectations of Messiah.

Well, Peter is disappointed in this, to say the least. More like horrified. So disturbed that he pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him—rebukes Jesus! Peter's expectations are shattered, and he is disappointed to his very core, disappointed in every way.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-mark-827-38>

Jesus rebukes Peter right back and then makes it worse by saying that those who follow Jesus—the disciples themselves—will also suffer and lose their lives for the sake of the gospel.

Soul deep disappointment. Disappointment at what God has done or what God has failed to do. Again, like last week, the Psalms testify that this is a universal human experience.

And, just like the wilderness, that disappointment is holy. The disappointment can lead us to a harder and deeper truth. God's disappointment in the Israelites, and Moses's disappointment in God's reaction and in the Israelites' idolatry all led to a strengthened relationship between God and Moses, a renewal of the Law and the covenant. Peter's disappointment in Jesus's understanding of who the Messiah would be leads to a deeper truth not only of who Jesus is, but of what discipleship means and requires. It's not an easy truth, but it's a real truth, a holy truth.

My friend's deeper truth that came through disappointment was that he realized he wasn't really happy in that first job. And he's found a place where he is more at home. That kind of clarity can be holy.

Our disappointment can lead to deeper insight into ourselves, into our relationships, into God. We can realize where our expectations were unrealistic or narrow-minded. We can learn and open ourselves to the truth that God is speaking to us.

Our disappointments are hard. And they are holy, thanks be to God.