

## ... the Son of Man must undergo great suffering

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

Psalm 22:23–31

Romans 4:13–25

Mark 8:31–38

### **Text: Mark 1:12-13**

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

### **Introduction**

In his essay [How The World Lost Its Story](#), theologian Robert W. Jenson wrote that “modernity has supposed we inhabit what I will call a “narratable world.” Modernity has supposed that the world “out there” is such that stories can be told that are true to it. There is no mystery about how Western modernity came by this supposition. The supposition is straightforwardly a secularization of Jewish and Christian practice—as indeed these are the source of most key suppositions of Western intellectual and moral life.

If there is little mystery about where the West got its faith in a narratable world, neither is there much mystery about how the West has lost this faith. ... The story the Bible tells is asserted to be the story of God with His creatures; that is, it is both assumed and explicitly asserted that there is a true story about the universe because there is a universal novelist/historian. Modernity was defined by the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller.

The experiment has failed. It is, after the fact, obvious that it had to: If there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line. Postmodernism—where we are currently—is characterized by the loss of this supposition in all of its aspects.” Today, you are encouraged to make your own story, live by your own identity, make meaning as best you can.

1. The gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—claims to be the true story of the universe. Our calling as a church is to make this news known. I wonder how this is heard by a culture that has rejected the very idea of an ‘universal storyteller.’ As a preacher of the gospel, I wonder how to proclaim this good news in a way for it to be heard is just such a culture. Are people frustrated with the project of making your own story? I was intrigued by a 2021 webinar offered through the alumni office of Victoria University (UoT) titled, ‘The Midlife Re Think’ that offered “to help design what’s next. Ready or not, each phase of life demands that we grow and change”—stated the promotion—“A bit of thinking goes a long way in becoming a skilled life transitionist, ready to redraw (or just update) the map of our lives.”

The gospel writer Mark emphasises the point in his story of Jesus when Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” The Son of Man ‘must’, said Jesus; I invite you to highlight that word ‘must.’ Jesus here implies that there is a map for his life that has been set in some way—this is no ‘midlife re think.’ The word ‘must’ implies

that there is a story that Jesus is enacting; a story not of his own making; Jesus describes his life as living in obedience to the one he calls the Father; it is a story whose outcome is nothing that his followers wanted anything to do with. Our culture is suspicious that anything ‘must’ be one way and not another. Jesus’ disciples also balk at the ‘must,’ albeit for different reasons. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering,” said our Lord.

Postmodernism has rejected the notion of a ‘universal storyteller,’ and has done so by replacing one universal story with another. The postmodern claim that the universe in which we live has no overall purpose—that it is simply there—is itself a universal story, albeit a different one than the one the gospel asserts. So maybe the question isn’t whether there is a universal story or not, but rather which story comports with the actuality of our lives. For instance, if the universe has no meaning why do humans—ostensibly a component part of that universe—crave meaningfulness for their lives? Does this human desire for our life to be significant, perhaps indicate that this claim of a purposeless universe may be inconsistent with our lived experience?

I think it true that we often live life embracing suppositions unknowingly or without examining them. For those educated with postmodern suppositions regarding our lives, we may have embraced unexamined ideas and I probe with this question regarding meaning just to invite us to think about those suppositions and ask do they comport with the actuality of life as I experience it. Is it possible that these postmodern suppositions are not as solid as we may have thought?

2. The gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God—claims to be the disclosure of the true story of the universe and thus of our lives. Jesus comes to make that known to us but more than that he is the enactment of that story. The gospel claim is that humanity needs redeeming and Jesus is that redemption. Humanity has rejected the universal storyteller, and each gone off to tell their own story; we find mapping out our lives difficult because we have rejected the One who created the landscape in which we live and move and have our being. There are any number of metaphors that could be used to depict how the gospel characterizes humanity’s rejection of God.

In our gospel reading today we have reached the hinge point in the story of Jesus’ life and ministry. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that from this point on they are on their way to Jerusalem. Mark makes the point that there was a change or addition to Jesus’ teaching. The Galilean ministry is coming to an end; we are now heading to Jerusalem. When Jesus began to teach them that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering” we are now on our way to where this great suffering will occur. This became a staple of Jesus’ teaching—so much so that Mark repeats this point three times to make sure that his hearers don’t miss the emphasis—an emphasis that Jesus is making for all who are following or would follow him. And the gospel asserts that this is for us; the gospel holds out this suffering of Jesus and being killed as the event on which our salvation depends. It is the very hinge of history; the defeat of death and evil; the ushering in of the new age. Everything in the gospel is understood through the prism of what happens to Jesus at a garbage dump just outside Jerusalem.

Permit me a brief aside to explain Jesus’ self-referential use of the title “Son of Man.” In Mark’s gospel just prior to the initial announcement of his coming suffering he asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am.” They answered, correctly according to Jesus, “You are the

Messiah.” That is that Jesus is Israel’s long promised Messiah who comes to redeem them—and for these disciples that was understood as release from Roman occupation. Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Why? Jesus knew his mission was to do battle with an enemy of far greater danger than the Roman army. Jesus knows how easily people could organize armed rebellion if they thought the Messiah would lead them to military victory. Jesus is headed to Jerusalem for another purpose altogether.

Instead of the title ‘Messiah’ Jesus chooses to refer to himself as ‘the Son of Man.’ This title comes from a vision in the older testament prophet Daniel—a vision with which all his disciples were familiar. The vision was of four beasts each representing succeeding superpowers of the world as history unfolded. Finally, Daniel sees God takes his throne rendering judgement on these beasts and as that is unfolding he sees “one like **a son of man** coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:12-14). Jesus claims to be this ‘son of man.’

The vision in Daniel is a depiction of God setting everything to rights. In other words, the gospel asserts that as Jesus heads to Jerusalem something of greater significance is occurring than we can apprehend in the movers and shakers of the world; heaven and earth are overlapping; the true history of the world is unfolding. Kingdoms are colliding. The Son of Man is coming to be given dominion.

For Christians, the cross is a precious symbol of our faith and we treasure it. Crosses adorn our churches and are worn as jewelry. We thus have a hard time hearing how revolting this all sounds to the disciples as they hear it from Jesus’ lips. So much so that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him in private for talking nonsense. In essence to wear a cross on a chain around our necks is to wear as a symbol of faith a cruel means of execution. The first century world was revolted by the spectacle of crucifixion—it wasn’t mentioned in polite company in the Roman world. Its very purpose was to be as cruel as possible. Believing in a crucified man as saviour of the world was considered nuts by most people. If we wore a gallows or electric chair as jewelry around our necks, you might begin to get the idea of how the cross was viewed in this first century world.

You notice that Jesus won’t be silenced on this point. Peter may have taken him aside but immediately Jesus calls the crowd with his disciples explaining what this means as his followers. We are to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. The “Son of Man must undergo great suffering.” Why? The disciples are so revolted they can’t even hear ‘after three days rise again.’ Jesus tells them they are setting their minds not on divine things but on human things. There is another story unfolding in Jesus—something that can’t be discovered from below no matter how skilful we are in mapping our own lives from a human perspective. There is something much deeper at work here. The very idea that suffering produces anything good is revolting to hear in our world. Jesus’ assertion sounds crazy to our postmodern ears for our own reasons.

The gospel asserts that we are lost in our sin—spiritually dead is how the Apostle Paul puts it. In fact, we are blinded to God’s judgement that we are sinners by our sin. Whatever needs to be fixed for humanity to thrive we certainly don’t think that cruel suffering will avail anything. Yet the gospel asserts that God’s story—the true story of God’s redeeming wayward humanity—claims it must be this way. Will we go to Jerusalem with Jesus and see?

To offer another metaphor for the human predicament consider a fish out of water. Our world has no difficulty recognizing the distress of a fish out of water. The fish gasps, twitches, convulses. As soon as it’s put back into the water it swims away without hint of distress. Our world gets the point where fish are concerned, but doesn’t get the point where humans are concerned; namely, God’s presence, his “face”, is the sphere, the environment for which we were made and apart from which we are always going to be distressed. The great fourth century theologian Augustine wrote, “We are made for God. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.”

3. ... the Son of Man must undergo great suffering. The gospel claim that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is a metaphor of sacrifice for describing this event that changes everything. The event is Jesus’ death on a cross and when I think, as the gospel affirms, that that this was for me clearly the problem of my sin is oceans deeper than I care to imagine. Why must it be so? We are unable to apprehend what sin means to God; at the cross its utter wickedness is revealed in its unrelenting pursuit to destroy the sinless son of God.

In writing about Abraham believing God the Apostle Paul spoke about the ‘righteousness of faith.’ The word ‘righteousness’ refers to right standing with God. Relationship restored. Sins forgiven. Navigating life with the map of his love guiding us. The Apostle said that this depends on faith, and that this righted-relationship is reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.’

Jesus comes to gather us into his great story of redemption and this is apprehended by faith. Faith is a kind of knowing—the knowing of relationship. Faith isn’t what you do when you have run out of explanations. Faith ever seeks understanding, but at its heart is relationship with God. This is why the most intimate relationship in life, marriage, is the most common biblical metaphor for faith.

The disciples are clearly reeling from Jesus’ proclamation “that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” But you notice that they kept on going with him to Jerusalem. Yes, there were mysteries here they could not understand yet. It is evident that they keep on following Jesus because of the relationship with him. While we may never fully apprehend the transaction that occurred as the cross as we continue our Lenten journey to go there with Jesus more can be apprehended about the true story of the universe we live in and our lives within it. Will we go with him?

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering ... Amen.