

Mark 8:31-38 (NRSV)

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. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm going to have to ask you to trust me for a little while today. I'm going to ask you to suspend your disbelief in what I'm about to say for a few minutes. Once every so often you get an insight that staggers you a little bit and you need a second to get your bearings. That happened to me this week and I want to share it with you, but, as I say, I'll need for you to trust me for a few minutes.

It started out innocently enough. As I've mentioned we're doing a series of Soup and Study sessions on the core stories of the Old and New Testament. The first core story is God's call of Abraham, or more appropriately Abram, because God changes his name in the course of the story.

But in the back of my mind, I was wondering why we didn't start with the story of Adam and Eve, the story of the Fall from the Garden of Eden. After all, the creation story is one of the most famous in the Hebrew Scriptures, no? It's the one we all remember, Adam and Eve and the serpent and how evil entered the world?

Well, one reason that our study of the core stories of the Bible starts with call stories and not fall stories is that the Bible is full of call stories, but there is only one story of the Fall. Call stories – as I say, the Bible is full of them. Let's imagine that a call story is any time that God intervenes in a person's life to advance God's plan for creation. Well, it happens all the time – certainly God intervenes in Abram and Sarai's life to create the people of God through Isaac. God intervenes in Noah's life to get him to build an ark and herd all those animals and all his relatives on it to save a remnant of creation. God calls prophets like Moses and Samuel and Isaiah and Amos and Ezekiel, God calls kings like Saul and Paul. But God also calls a woman named Rahab who has a bad reputation but who hides the spies who have come to scout out a way to conquer Jericho. God calls faithful people and unfaithful ones, comparative saints and sinners, smart people and foolish people, beautiful people and plain people.

There are lots of call stories, but there's only one fall story, or maybe two if you include not only Adam and Eve, but also that the first thing that Noah does when he gets off the Ark is to plant a vineyard so that he can get drunk. You see, a fall story is good at assigning blame, at deciding how evil came into the world and why we're such a mess. Is it the serpent's fault, is it Eve's fault or Adam's? But, I think there's a reason that the Bible is filled with call stories but has only one or maybe two fall stories.

You see, I don't think God is very interested in how evil entered the world. After all, the buck stops with God – if you want to blame someone for anything and everything, God is the best candidate. But

God got it the first time – if God was going to allow people to make choices that matter then at least some of the time we’re going to get them wrong, and when we do, we sin. If God was going to allow people to wander, to mess up, to turn away from God, then some of the time we would do those things and that is sin. What God is a lot more interested in is in calling us back.

It is odd, isn’t it, that Almighty God, the creator of Heaven and Earth, needs to ask his creatures for their help? That God who spoke worlds into existence now has to talk his people into participating in his plan to reconcile the world to him. We’re fond of saying that people have a God-shaped hole in the center of our being. Does God have a human-shaped hole in his center? I don’t know, but I know that the Bible is full of stories of God calling his people, to journey with him, to abide in him, to share their lives with him.

One question that came up in our Bible study is why it is that God works through such flawed and morally ambiguous people? Well, in retrospect, that’s pretty obvious – God works through morally ambiguous people because that’s the only kind there are. With one notable exception, people are flawed, people are weak, people are imperfect. God has gotten past that. But we haven’t. We go back to the creation story again and again to figure out who is at fault. But have you noticed that the Old Testament almost never refers to Adam and Eve and the Creation story again? In the New Testament, Paul talks about Adam in the letter to the Romans, yes, and perhaps another day we’ll talk about that, but in the Hebrew Scriptures, Creation and Fall are water under the bridge. God is more practical, more applied, more focused. God has moved on, and we should, too.

Does God think we can be perfect, that we can return to our condition before the Fall? I don’t know – I do recall Jesus saying that we should be perfect as our Father is perfect. But in any case, we can

sure be *better* and in so many places in the Bible, God works for better rather than perfect.

Abram is flawed, he tries to pass off his wife Sarai as his sister so that Pharaoh won't kill him, but God never deserts Abram. Moses is deeply flawed, is never allowed into the Promised Land, but God loves Moses, God says that there was never a prophet the equal of Moses. David is deeply flawed, David steals his friend's wife and arranges for his friend's death, and God loves him, God just dotes on him all his life. We are all deeply flawed, and God just loves us, just rejoices in us. Does God judge us? Yes, of course, as any parent judges her children. Does God think we can be perfect? I don't know, but we sure can be better. That's why there are all those call stories to all those different kinds of people that God enlists in support of his daring plan to take back creation.

Nancy Campbell, one of our members, has a blog and in it I read something this week that really touched me – that God works through *difficulties* but that the devil works through *discouragement*. Let me say that again – God works through difficulties, the devil works through discouragement. In the context of today's sermon, when there are difficulties, even difficulties of our own making, God calls us to surmount them or work around them, to turn them into opportunities to change and to grow. The devil tells us we can't, we won't and we shouldn't even try. God would *never* say that.

The story of Creation and Fall appeals to us, because it tells us, we think, why things are the way they are and who is to blame. But God is not so interested in how things are and who is to blame. God is a lot more interested in how things can be, in reclaiming creation and giving it a future, a future that involves, a future that *depends on* the morally ambiguous people whom he loves so much, perhaps in spite of, perhaps because of their flaws. A morally ambiguous people with a God-shaped hole in their middles, a people whom he calls, again and again, and on whom he has never given up and never will.

The core stories of the Bible are stories that we need to be reminded of, stories that God uses to instruct us and transform us. They are stories of call and not stories of shame, stories of freedom and not stories of slavery, stories of grace and not stories of blame, stories of difficulty, yes, but never stories of discouragement.

Amen.