

THE MISSING VERSE
The Second Sunday in Lent
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February 28, 2021

Lent is, first and foremost, a penitential season. Merriam-Webster defines penitence simply as “sorrow for sins or faults.” Today’s Gospel can very properly be thought of as a quintessential Lenten text. Immediately prior to it, Peter has confessed Jesus as the Messiah. Then, in our text, Jesus begins to teach that he must suffer, be rejected, and be killed, then after three days rise again. Peter, fresh on the heels of his confession, takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. But Jesus immediately rebukes Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Mark 8:33)

Here is language that can define the journey of Lent. We are to set our minds on divine things, not human things. When Jesus addresses Peter as Satan it is “because he is thinking in ways opposed to God.” (Darrell Bock, *Mark*, p.244) Our penitence during Lent is for the degree to which our minds have been set on the wrong things. Our Lenten disciplines are intended to make room for God so that we may set our minds on divine things. In a very real way, this sums up what the season is about.

Jesus goes on to explain that being his follower involves self-denial, taking up one’s own cross. Focusing on saving one’s own life will result in losing it; losing one’s life “for the sake of the gospel” will result in saving it. (Mark 8:35) If one is ashamed of this teaching, Jesus will be ashamed of him or her when he comes again in glory. (Mark 8:38)

If we are ashamed of Jesus’ admonition to be prepared to suffer – to value the gospel even above our own lives – if we are embarrassed by this, our minds will not be set on divine things. We will miss the mark. Our attention will wander to human things. And in the end, Jesus says, he will be ashamed of us.

Hard words indeed, but necessary ones. Lent is a time for these hard words. It is meant to bring us up short. Writing about today’s Gospel, the writer and theologian Rose Schrott says that “Jesus reminds us that the power and hierarchy of this world have no place in the upside-down kingdom of God.” (*Red Letter Wake Up*, 2/24/21) Our attention needs to be directed back towards God, away from the worldly distractions that have replaced God’s priorities. Without this redirection, we might continue to live in ways that shame our Lord.

So ends today’s Gospel reading.

But ... what about the next verse, Mark 9: 1? Here’s an interesting fact: it is left out of the lectionary. We read Mark 8:31-38 on the Second Sunday in Lent, in Year B; and just two weeks ago, we read Mark 9: 2-9, Mark’s version of the Transfiguration, on the Last Sunday After the Epiphany. But Mark 9: 1 is left out. Listen to it: “And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” (Mark 9:1) “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” Then follows the Transfiguration story, said to have taken place six days later.

So why the missing verse? It seems the problem scholars have wrestled with is whether this verse belongs with the very Lenten Gospel we heard today or with the dazzling light of the Transfiguration Gospel. Unable to agree – they just left it out!

It is a glaring omission. Jesus speaks very hard words, but then extends promise and hope in the omitted verse. “Some standing here,” he says – those who have redirected their minds to God and not stayed ashamed of the Gospel – will experience the kingdom of God in their own lifetimes. Those who are true to the way of the cross will receive a very great reward indeed.

If we add that verse back in – as I believe we should – we get a much more nuanced and integrated picture of what Lent is about. Because while it is at its core absolutely a time of penitence, a time of admonition, even a time of pain, in the Christian life there is always the promise of forgiveness and new life. This is true always, and the days of Lent are no exception.

Here’s a Chapter 9 Verse 1 story. A beloved uncle of mine – my father’s older brother by nine years – had a life of considerable misfortune and hardship. A polio victim as a child, he had to drop out of school to go to work to support the family during the Great Depression. Because one of his legs was permanently damaged by the polio, he was not able to serve in the military, which might have afforded him educational opportunities, the way it did his younger brother, who went to college on the GI Bill. My uncle was never a success financially or professionally and lived with tremendous shame and a sense of failure. His health was never good, and he lived the last several years of his life in a nursing facility.

I visited him as often as I could – I was a young Methodist minister in a nearby town – and sometimes when I visited, I met an equally young Episcopal priest who had begun visiting my uncle because the nursing home had listed him as an Episcopalian. This had indeed been his childhood faith but he had long since fallen away from the church.

And in those last days of my uncle’s life, God reached my uncle through that young priest’s faithful ministry to him. I saw the change happen, very tangibly, even as he declined and then died.

The young priest presided at my uncle’s burial, and I will always remember the moment when he scooped a handful of earth and made the sign of the cross on the casket. I knew in my heart in that moment that my uncle’s life, which had been in many ways one long Lent, had not ended in suffering but in the joy of God’s kingdom. His mind had been set on divine things.

Later today, take out your Bible and read today’s Gospel with the extra verse added on. Let it bless your Lenten observances with the reminder that suffering is not the end of the story.