

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**March 4, 2012**  
**Mark 8:31-38**

**“You are not what we had in mind...”**

*Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.  
Fill the hearts of your faithful,  
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*

Years ago when I was newly ordained and still wet behind the ears, I was asked to do a burial service, called an interment, at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. I worked very hard getting ready for the service, consulting the *UCC Book of Worship* and asking colleagues about the parts and the flow. I was nervous. I sort of over-prepared just to make sure everything went perfectly.

On the day of the service I got up early and made my way to Mount Auburn Cemetery way in advance. I found the site for the burial and, as the first one to arrive, I just stood there alone. After a while, a car drove up and parked. I realized these were the men from the funeral home. A tall, dignified, middle-aged man dressed all in black from his hat to his shoes got out of the car, came up to me and shook my hand. He introduced himself to me and introduced to me the younger man behind him. It turned out the younger man, maybe in his early 20s, was the older man's son.

The men busied themselves with things in the car and I stood by the burial plot ready and rigid. I was sure my nervousness showed, I was sure they could tell I was a novice. I was sure I was going to make big mistakes. After a few minutes, the younger man walked up to me with a small jar full of water and a vase-like thing full of dirt.

“Here,” he said, “these are for you.”

I paused. I did not put out my hands.

“Holy water and blessed dirt,” he said trying to explain and make me take them.

I still paused. I had no idea what to do with holy water and blessed dirt.

Finally I said, “Thank you, but I will not be needing them.”

The young man looked surprised and then without thinking about it or censoring himself he said, “You're not what we had in mind...”

The young man did not say it in a mean-spirited way, the words just fell out of his mouth before he could catch himself.

I did not blame him and actually I wasn't hurt. I was NOT what they had in mind. They had a male Priest in mind, a Catholic Father, someone who looked the part and knew what he was doing...someone who would accept and use the holy water and blessed dirt.

Standing there with my clerical collar hidden by my overcoat, looking anxious and inexperienced, I was not at all what they had in mind.

In today's reading from the Book of Mark, the disciple Peter has a similar awkward moment with Jesus that the funeral director's son had with me. Peter expected one thing and got another and a sort of unfortunate sentence fell out of his mouth.

Picture the scene...

Jesus tells his disciples that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed. While Jesus also announces that he will rise again after three days, it appears that this important detail goes unnoticed by the disciples. And it is no wonder. At the mention of suffering, rejection and death, they stopped listening! This kind of talk by Jesus is totally unacceptable. They have been waiting for a MESSIAH and a Messiah would not suffer and die like that. And yet this is what Jesus is saying, for this is what Messiahship means for him.

But this is not what the disciples, especially Peter, had in mind. They had in mind a Messiah who would deliver the Jews from Roman oppression...they had a warrior in mind. The Galilee was the hotbed of revolutionary activity in the Roman Empire, and Jesus was from the Galilee. Jesus was supposed to throw off the yoke of Roman rule, take the Roman boot off the throats of the occupied people. Jesus was supposed to be a Messiah who rose to power and defeated Caesar.

And here Jesus is telling the disciples that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the scribes and be killed.

Oh no, Peter is thinking. This is awful.

And without censoring himself, the words just fall out of Peter's mouth and basically he tells Jesus, "You are not what we had in mind."

That is essentially what happens when Peter has the nerve to take Jesus aside and rebuke him. Imagine the scene...Peter walks over to Jesus, puts his arm around him, and proceeds to set Jesus straight about Messiahship.

“Suffering, rejection and death are not on the agenda. Prestige, power, and dominion ARE on the agenda. It is David’s throne we’re after Jesus, the plan is to rule the nations with power and might. We signed on for a crown not a cross.”

Peter is essentially saying, you are not what we had in mind. We thought you were the real deal, the Messiah we had been waiting for. But the future scenario you have sketched out is totally off base.

However, Jesus will have none of Peter rewriting the story, redefining what the Messiah is meant to be or do, and recasting Jesus as a powerful warrior.

“Get behind me Satan!” Jesus says to Peter.

I am not what you had in mind? Well, I AM the Messiah....so change what you had in mind.

In the Jewish tradition, Messiah meant “the anointed one.” David was anointed and he had an army, Cyrus was anointed and he had an army, Caesar was anointed and he had an army.

Jesus, the new Messiah, has a band of fishermen. No army, no weapons, no stallions, no armor, no power, no authority, no way to overthrow Caesar.

Oh no. Jesus, you are not what we had in mind.

Not only is Jesus weak, powerless, and essentially broke, he walks from village to village touching healing, visiting and eating with people who are weak, powerless and essentially broke.

Maybe Jesus’ ministry had been vaguely acceptable to the disciples up until this point. But when Jesus tells the disciples that he will be rejected, suffer and be killed, Peter has had it. Okay we have followed and believed in you, but now this. You really are not what we had in mind.

And to top it off, Jesus refers to the cross. That is the last straw.

Mark 8:34:

*Jesus 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.”*

This is the most awful part. The Messiah who we had pinned our hopes on is referring to the cross. Jesus could not have chosen a more vivid image.

In first-century Palestine the cross meant one thing: DEATH, the cruel, tortuous death that awaited any who dared threaten Caesar's kingdom. The Romans put up crosses like billboards advertising Caesar's supremacy and the fate of anyone who dared to challenge it. Jesus' disciples knew exactly what "taking up the cross" meant. Every ten years or so the Romans did a sweep of the countryside and crucified thousands of dissidents at once. In the year 6 CE, when Jesus and many of the disciples were young, they had watched the Romans crucify 2,000 Galilean insurrectionists in that one year. Imagine the impression that made on them. And now Jesus is talking about taking up the cross.

The disciples wanted Jesus to be something he was not. Peter dared to coach Jesus, instruct him about what kind of Messiah he should be. Essentially telling Jesus, You are not what we had in mind, Peter thought he could straighten Jesus out, make him get in line, and be the warrior general he had in mind. "Get behind me Satan!" was Jesus response to the coaching.

But the warrior Jesus image did not die with Peter. Many of us my age and older grew up with a warrior Jesus presented to us and I think that image remains. In a world that solves most conflicts through violence and the threat of violence, many Christians long for and envision an all-powerful Jesus who can vanquish every foe.

*The Pilgrim Hymnal*, which was in the pews in this Church when I arrived seven years ago, has in it the hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*. I learned that hymn by heart as a child and, growing up, I never questioned the imagery or the message. Christ is the king, the master, the leader of the army and we are the proud Christian foot soldiers...some of you sang this as kids...

*Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus going on before;  
Christ the royal Master, Leads again the foe;  
Forward into battle, See his banners go...*

Okay you might say "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was written in the late 1800s, we do not think of Jesus in those ways any longer. Oh no? Another popular hymn, in our own Chalice Hymnal in your pews today is hymn #613...

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross;  
Lift high his royal banner, it must not suffer loss;  
From victory unto victory his army shall he lead,  
Till every foe is vanquished, and Christ is Lord indeed.*

I think it is comforting to think of Jesus and of God as omniscient and omnipotent—always present and all powerful. I think some Christians believe that with enough praying, dedication, and faithful Christian behavior we can harness God's limitless power, and God will be on OUR side, and God will make good things happen in OUR lives. We will hold high that royal banner and move from victory unto victory.

I believe God is all loving but not all powerful. If Jesus was the incarnate, God made flesh, God with us being in ancient Palestine, and we know about his choices and his life, then we must accept that Jesus and therefore God are NONVIOLENT. All Jesus had, as I have preached before, were his words and his hands. His power was in his example, his unconditional love, his surprising care for the dispossessed, his moving sermons, his solidarity with the marginalized and his brave challenges to the status quo. Jesus loved justice not war, peace-making not conflict, connection not dominion, community not conquest. He was powerful because he spoke to the deepest longings we carry within us: the longing to be whole, the yearning to feel close to God, and the desire to take our place in the human family.

Poor Peter. He wanted Jesus to be mightier. He wanted Jesus to defeat Caesar. He wanted Jesus to be a Messiah, the anointed one, the way David the warrior was, the way Cyrus the warrior was, the way Caesar the warrior was. Peter followed Jesus and even loved him, but Jesus was not what he had in mind.

But the real Jesus is what we had in mind. We do not love him for his limitless power. We love him for his passion and principles. The real Jesus is what we had in mind: fierce in his loving, passionate in his teaching, devoted to his followers, selfless in his calling, and dedicated to his journey with God.

We need to let Jesus be Jesus...nonviolent and strong, a dreamer and a do-er, brave in the face of injustice, and courageous enough to be martyred.

The real Jesus is just what we had in mind...the holy one who continues to inspire us to work for justice, the spiritual presence who continues to counsel and comfort us, the brotherly figure who continues to love and believe in us, the nonviolent warrior who emptied himself because that is what he believed he was called to do.

Jesus, you are what we had in mind. And your Spirit is here within and among us. And you continue to lead us—with your words, your work, and your witness. We love you, we thank you, and we honor your all-loving but not all-powerful self. Amen.