

Welcome to My World  
Sermon on Mark 8:31-38 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, March 12, 2006

I'm not sure when the phrase, "Welcome to my world" got started. The Irish tenor Daniel O'Donnell made a CD entitled "Welcome to My World" in 2004, whose title track is a remake of the country hit by Jim Reeves, composed 40 years earlier. There was a Belgian documentary called "Welcome to My World" that was filmed in 1999. "Welcome to My World" is also a Social Studies curriculum in California schools, a programming option on BBC Three, and the name for a host of Internet websites covering everything from careers in science and technology to the Christian poetry of Anna Marie somewhere in Florida to the mysterious world of the shark, narrated by a Frenchman to the accompaniment of the theme from "Chariots of Fire." (Is it my imagination, or is the Internet getting increasingly weird?)

"Welcome to my world" is a bit of a curious phrase, because it can be used in either a negative or a positive sense. A column by Camille Paglia in the online magazine *Salon* should illustrate the negative sense: "Since my last column three weeks ago," Paglia wrote in 2001, "the stock market has plunged, high-tech Seattle was rocked by an earthquake, two high school students were shot to death and 13 others wounded by a cherubic classmate in San Diego, pestilent livestock were slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands in Europe and a rogue Islamic regime ordered the violent destruction of ancient colossi of Buddha in Afghanistan. In short, welcome to my world!"<sup>1</sup> "Welcome to my world" here means, "Don't tell me. I know. I live with this stuff all the time. Been there, done that. The world is going to pot. What else is new?"

But many people—including the French shark enthusiast—use "Welcome to my world" in a positive sense. "Hi," they say. "This is the stuff I'm interested in, and I want to share it with you. Come in and explore the things I think and write about, the art I create, the songs I sing."

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<sup>1</sup> Camille Paglia, "Welcome to My World" in <http://www.salon.com/people/col/pag1/2001/03/21/spring/index.html>.

Welcome to my world becomes a call, an invitation to join in others in community, to share in someone else's life and work, to participate in a relationship that might change your life.

I think today's text is Jesus' way of saying, "Welcome to my world." After watching Jesus cast unclean spirits out of the demon-possessed, and heal the sick, and feed multitudes, and calm storms at sea, and even raise the dead, Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter answers, "You are the Messiah" (Mk. 8:29). Peter rightly sees that Jesus is God's Anointed One, the fulfillment of God's promises, the person promised by God to bring salvation to the people of Israel. Given his correct response, you would think that Jesus would say, "Right you are, Peter. Now let's get out there and tell the world about me." Jesus, however, "sternly ordered [the disciples] not to tell anyone about him" (8:30).

On the face of it, Jesus' command to silence makes no sense: Here he is, the savior of the world, and no one is supposed to know? If you discovered a cure for cancer, would you keep it a secret? If you won the lottery and gave it all to charity, would you refuse to tell? Why does Jesus insist that the people who have figured out who he really is can't tell a soul?

The answer is because the disciples know the right answer, but they don't know why or what that answer really means, and Jesus knows that they don't know. And following Jesus isn't like the SAT or the GRE where you get credit for the right answer even if you don't know why the answer is right. So Jesus had to instruct his disciples, had to shed light into their darkness: "[H]e 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" (8:31). Jesus had to make very clear that being the Messiah, the Anointed One, the One through whom God would save the world, was going to involve something entirely different than what the disciples were expecting.

It turns out that saving the world does not involve ticker tape parades or awards ceremonies or cocktail receptions or even a lecture series. No, says Jesus, the Son of Man—a figure who, according to Daniel 7 would be given “dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him”—will suffer greatly, and be rejected by the religious leaders of his own people, and be killed before rising on the third day. Being the Messiah involves suffering and rejection and death.

And that didn't sound right to Peter, who took Jesus aside for a little heart-to-heart to remind him of what this Messiah-thing was all about. For a man who got the question of Jesus' identity right, Peter had no idea about what Jesus' Messiahship meant. In order to show that the way of Messiah, the way of God, involves suffering and pain and death, Jesus turns back to the disciples and in front of them rebukes Peter. Jesus scolds his star pupil either for trying to tempt him to take the easy way out or for his failure to listen to what Jesus had been saying. Peter was still thinking in human terms about power and dominion and authority. He had not set his mind, as Jesus had, on the way of God which sees and manifests power and dominion and authority as faithful, humble, redemptive suffering—even unto death.

It's hard to blame Peter for trying to make Jesus see sense, that from his point of view suffering and getting killed wasn't going to do anybody a bit of good. But Joel Marcus tells us that this “natural human repugnance in the face of what appears to be defeat and disaster must give way to the divine logic which turns human valuation upside down.”<sup>2</sup> Those who would follow Jesus as his disciples must recognize that Jesus' rejection, suffering, and death do not occur as the result of the triumph of his opponents, but as the fulfillment of God's purpose and plan for the salvation of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

Only when we see that Jesus' death "is not a meaningless or tragic fate, but is freely accepted and purposeful"<sup>3</sup> can we begin to understand the life Jesus lived and the death he died—a life and a death in which he calls you and me to share. But what sort of call is this, and what kind of invitation, that "If any want to become [Jesus'] followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34)? Is there not enough suffering, is there not enough rejection, is there not enough death in the world that we must embrace them as disciples? As Bishop Ken Carder has asked, "Should not religious faith protect us from suffering, bring security, give us victory? This is no way to gain followers. Promised suffering, bearing crosses, losing one's life—that will not sell. That will not bring church growth! Protection from suffering, avoiding the cross, that is what we want and expect from God, is it not? Why follow a wounded, scarred, crucified Christ? We have enough suffering and rejection without this."<sup>4</sup>

The ancient Church Fathers knew well how much Jesus demanded of those who would follow him. They also knew that we can be faithful because Jesus is faithful. Caesarius of Arles admits that Jesus' injunction to deny self "seems harsh; we think he is imposing a burden on us. But an order is no burden when it is given by one who helps in carrying it out."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, says St. Augustine, "[W]hat [Jesus] commands is neither hard nor painful when he himself helps us in such a way so that the very thing he requires may be accomplished. ... For whatever seems hard in what is enjoined, love makes easy."<sup>6</sup>

When Jesus says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me," I want to defer. Isn't there an easier way? Couldn't we do this salvation thing without self-denial and suffering and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Carder, "Why Follow a Crucified Christ?", *Christian Century*, Aug. 27-Sept. 3, 1997 at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=655>.

<sup>5</sup> Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons* 159, in *Mark*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament II, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 106.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *Sermons on New Testament Lessons* 46.1, in Oden and Hall, *ibid.*

discipleship? Can't I be a follower without the pain, the difficulty, the loss of life? James Harnish writes that the Methodists of South Africa teach the world that "we will know the love of God that sent Jesus to suffer on the cross, not when we escape suffering, but when we embrace the suffering of others." This is Jesus' gift to us: that he walked the way of God, a way that led to the cross, "the way God intends to save this whole lost and broken creation."<sup>7</sup> When we accept the invitation to discipleship, when we deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus, when we suffer for the sake of the gospel, then we hear Jesus say, "Welcome to my world"—a world of love and life, a world of forgiveness and freedom, a world of grace and joy. On the lips of Jesus, Welcome to my world becomes a call, an invitation to join in others in community, to share in Jesus' life and work, to participate in a relationship that will change your life!

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<sup>7</sup> James A. Harnish, *Living with the Mind of Christ: A Lenten Study for Adults* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005) 25, 27.