

The disciples are notoriously slow to catch on, and nowhere more so than in Mark's gospel, where Jesus seems to be trying to keep everything a secret. In today's reading they catch a break for one moment, only to discover that what they thought they knew actually means something entirely different.

When Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is, it seems to be a way to open up the question of who *they* understand him to be. People think he's John the Baptist or Elijah, but Peter says no, you're the Messiah. And of course Jesus orders them not to tell anybody. But no sooner has he acknowledged being the messiah than he begins preparing them for persecution, a persecution that he expects to be fatal for him. That is not in the script. The Messiah is supposed to be a descendant of King David who rides in on a white horse, ousts the emperor handily, and re-establishes the Davidic monarchy under which every man sits under his vine and fig tree, living in peace and unafraid. What Jesus is talking about is something distressing on the personal level for his good friends *and* antithetical to the notion of a conquering king. When Peter objects, Jesus bluntly calls him "Satan," and tells him his mind is on human things rather than divine things.

Knowing what we know (and what the narrator knew) about what was to come, we can sympathize not only with Peter but with Jesus. He doesn't want this to happen either. But he thinks it's inevitable, because the kind of program he's bringing is one that arouses fierce opposition. The Empire of God, this messiah has said, is one in which the last are first and the first are last, and historically the first have resisted that kind of reversal with some vehemence. And now, in a crescendo of grimness, he tells the crowd *and* the disciples that his followers must deny themselves and embrace the likelihood of humiliation and defeat for the rest of their

short lives. That's just how it works. You can preserve your life by following the rules of the empire, which protect you at the expense of other people suffering, OR you can be part of bringing about the K of G on earth, a covenanted community of equitable distribution, but there'll be a cost to it. You will give up whatever privilege of your own you enjoy, and you will also incur the wrath of empire.

Georgia Congressman John Lewis, who was active in the civil rights movement and suffered injury more than once, explained it this way. "If someone is being attacked and beaten," he said, "it is your responsibility to intervene to protect them." However, you don't get to beat on the attacker in order to rescue the victim. Intervening means stepping in and shielding your fellow marcher with your own body, accepting the blows yourself in order to save them, even at risk to your own life.

Well, why in the world would we want to do that, finally? That just seems like an awful way to live your life, and to choose it intentionally goes very much against the grain. But Jesus' answer is this: 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. You choose this suffering because it is the path to real life.

There is a transactional reading of this verse that suggests that it's performative: if we can prove to God how sincere and dedicated we are by depriving ourselves of good things, God will promote us to eternal life. I probably don't need to tell you I think that's wrong. I think Jesus means that passionate commitment to the values of the kingdom, while dangerous and painful, is where we find ourselves most fully alive. I understand from people who read Greek that the word "life" is actually "self." Those who want to save their selves will lose them, and

those who lose their selves for Jesus' sake will save them. It's hard not to hear echoes of great mystics from both Eastern and Western traditions, who teach that once we've developed a nice healthy ego, we must overcome our identification with it. You should spend your childhood and early adulthood developing a robust sense of self, but there comes a point when identifying only with that self is very limiting, and it's time to burst the bonds and realize more fully our unity with all of God's creation. Our *real* selves are inextricably enmeshed with Creation and God.

There was some buzz last week about a new book, *Dark Towers: Deutsche Bank, Donald Trump, and an Epic Trail of Destruction* by David Enrich. As NPR put it, no bank descended as far into ignominy as Germany's Deutsche Bank. Its rap sheet includes a staggering array of ethical and legal lapses, including money laundering, tax fraud and sanctions violations — not to mention mysterious ties to President Trump that federal investigators are even now looking into. It seems to have been seduced by the siren song of Wall Street to find new ways of making money, and drifted inexorably into these white-collar crimes that actually translate into human suffering, enough degrees removed from the perpetrators that they can pretend they're not hurting anyone.

What caught my attention when I saw reviews of the book was how many suicides were associated with Deutsche Bank, and not by its victims. Bill Broeksmit, an executive who was with the bank during its growth and decline, who saw the law begin to take an interest in it, killed himself in 2014. He left an electronic paper trail, and his son found “minutes of board meetings. Financial plans. Indecipherable spreadsheets. Password-protected presentations. And evidence of his father's misery.”¹

Also in 2014, Charlie Gambino, an in-house bank lawyer, hanged himself at his home in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. At the time, Gambino was attempting to navigate Deutsche through its Libor rate-fixing nightmare. And this past November, Tom Bowers, a banker who worked on Trump's account, killed himself. Bowers was a source for the book's author with firsthand knowledge of the bank's \$640m loan on Trump International Hotel & Tower, Chicago.

I don't know any more than I already told you. But it seems plausible to me that these men had put all their energy into "saving" (establishing, advancing) themselves, even to the point of going along with new levels of rapaciousness and deception, and then, maybe when the law threatened them or maybe when something else went wrong for them, they collapsed. They could not see any meaningful life beyond the spot where they'd gotten themselves. It did not profit them to gain the whole world, when they had forfeited their real selves.

In the scripture lesson, Jesus and a few of the guys then climb a mountain. The disciples momentarily see Jesus in dazzling white, and in the presence of Moses and Elijah. They hear the voice of God, claiming Jesus as God's Son, the Beloved. It's a disorienting moment of glory, and I think it's meant to /foreshadow/ the glory that is the other side of losing one's "self." The present moment is not all of reality, and voluntary suffering transforms into glory. Suffering is human, and glory is human, and as biblical scholar F. Dale Bruner has written, "The purpose of our lives is to remove the veil from the Father's face, and to display something of God's glory to the world."

Do we think that God's glory is not in us, not in our mundane lives? That's what those poor Deutsche Bank executives must have thought; that's why they would work so hard and close their hearts to the suffering of humanity, because they thought the only glory possible

was the glory of wealth and power. But they missed what was right in front of their eyes, the heart-rending glory of wallabies rescued from Australian wildfires, the awkward kindness of teenagers willing to overcome their embarrassment to show care for someone, the bonds of respect and affection that grow between residents of a nursing home. As C. S. Lewis wrote, there are no *ordinary* people. Rather, he says, "It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit--immortal horrors and everlasting splendours." When we put aside our little selves for the sake of love, we move into the realm of clarity in which we can see the glory of God manifested in the everyday. Laugh if you will, but the plurality of pictures on my phone are of our late dogs, Gina and Sophia, and of Maddox, and Caroline's cat and Bea's cat—all of which I cannot delete because they are a visual representation of *shalom*, the peace and abundance of God's kingdom. I also have a picture of an armadillo we saw browsing in the grass in Florida, and I can tell you that its little ears shone a delicate pink in the sunlight in an endearing way that could not be expressed in terms of dollars.ⁱⁱ

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, of all people, wraps it up for us in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The Mariner, you recall, had thoughtlessly shot an albatross, after which the dead bird lay heavily around his neck and his ship was becalmed until every sailor except himself died of thirst. He lies, almost unconscious, staring at the sea and gradually becomes aware of the water-snakes around the ship:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:

A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank

Like lead into the sea.

The Mariner finishes his story thus:

...

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

Lord of light, as you were transfigured on the mountain, your followers were given a glimpse of your glory. Shine your light in our lives so that we will realize how close we are at all times to your kingdom. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/feb/16/dark-towers-review-deutsche-bank-donald-trump>