



**ST. COLUMBA'S**  
**EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

*The Human One*  
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*St. Columba's Episcopal Church*  
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*Season of Creation*  
[Mark 9:30-37](#)

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Predicting the future is big business. There's the formal economy represented in Wall Street and sports betting. And the informal economy represented in our daily attempts to think about what we need to accomplish so that the next day will run smoothly. Like, I need to fill the car with gas today so that I'm not late for work tomorrow. I'm anticipating or predicting the future.

Philosophers argue about how to understand the future. Are the outcomes of our lives already predetermined and unchangeable? That's fatalism. Is every event in the natural world a link in the chain that determines every other event that is to come? That's causal determinism. Are our actions totally unrestricted and unbound so that the future is absolutely unknowable and thus absurdly random? That's a radical free-will view of human nature.

For the better part of the last two weeks I've been bedridden from a mysterious illness; and in the dark moments when the illness seemed impossible to defeat, these are the questions that kept rising in my cloud-filled brain.

Three weeks ago Jenna and I realized that in a few brief days in the future our lives were about to radically change. For the first time since moving to DC 18 months ago, all three of our children would be in the care of other loving, wonderful adults. And without having to move logistical mountains Jenna and I would be able to casually go out and enjoy each other's company, child free!

We eagerly made plans. Nothing too fancy. At the end of the week on my day off we'd eat out and order chips and dip and margaritas. We'd talk. We'd not rush. We'd not worry. We'd drink-in a kind of adult freedom. And revel in each other's company.

Two days later -- the very day we were to go out on this new adventure -- I was sicker than I had ever been in my life. And it's moments like that -- when the rug is so comically pulled out from underneath you that cosmic questions about the deep structure of the world seem impossible to ignore. Was it karma? Was it fate? Had the tragic unluckiness of 2020 rubbed off on us in some kind of permanent, everlasting way?

I'm still recovering -- still unexpectedly fatigued and worn out. It wasn't COVID -- all three kids and I tested negative multiple times for it. And even now whatever virus it was is unnamed. But it was Jenna who saved our family. Who cared for the kids as a single mother for days and days. Who nursed me back to health. So heroic and selfless were her actions, towards the end of the illness, in deep appreciation and awe, I said to her, Jenna I hope someday you get really, really sick so I can return the favor.

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In today's Gospel Jesus also seems like he's involved in the prediction business. It's a prediction he makes three different times -- all three predictions over just a couple of chapters. The path that Jesus is on is one that -- from Jesus' perspective -- will irrevocably lead to the cross. He will suffer, be killed, and then rise from the dead.

Mark is filled with riddles. From the very beginning Mark creates a number of tensions within the text. For instance John the Baptist tells us that unlike his own ministry Jesus will not baptize with water, rather Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. But when does that happen? Mark never explicitly tells us when or even how Jesus baptizes in this manner.

Also Mark puts Jesus as far away from traditional power structures as possible. Unlike Matthew and Luke there's no birth narrative where Jesus gets entangled with visiting kings and is chased by a tyrant. There's no genealogy claiming a through line to powerful ancestors. Mark places Jesus in the backwaters of Palestine and even there Jesus repeatedly retreats further into the wilderness.

One of the greatest tensions that Mark places before the reader is the name of Jesus. When the powers of evil try to name Jesus, he silences them. Even when Jesus heals he often asks for his identity to be kept secret. Jesus' identity is a mystery for all those who encounter him -- a mystery to everyone except the reader. For us, Mark is rather direct: in the very first sentence of the book, Mark tells us Jesus is the Messiah.

But in the Gospel, Jesus -- until the very end -- never accepts that title. Instead he calls himself the "Son of Man." That's how our Bible translates it. But more literally it means the son of humanity. The Greek word is "anthropos" and its near equivalent in Hebrew is *hā-ʾā-dām* ; *hā-ʾā-dām* is that thing that God pulls from the dust in Genesis -- us: Adam or humankind. Ched Myers translates "the Son of Man" as the "human one."

As Jesus gets closer and closer to the cross, it is imperative that the disciples understand his name, this title. Last week Amy masterfully keyed us into the drama of drama. The power of stories and the power they give those who create them. When Jesus asks the disciples for his name, Peter says “Messiah,” but Jesus rather slyly substitutes Messiah for “the Son of Man,” the “Human One.”

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In the beginning of Mark Jesus describes the religious elite as the blind and the hard hearted. Those outside his circle. But after Jesus expands his ministry from a ministry mostly just for the Hebrew poor to also include the gentile poor there is something of a ruptorous break with the disciples. When they get back in the boat with him, they barely recognize him. From that point on Jesus does not describe those on the outside -- the religious elite -- as being blind, but rather it's his own disciples. Their hearts are hardened to Jesus' true identity.

Today's Gospel perfectly illustrates why. Even as Jesus predicts his own suffering and death and resurrection his disciples play games with one another about who is the greatest. For them the Messiah will mean total domination of their foes. Jesus is their ticket from backwater Palestine to the halls of power in Jerusalem.

Jesus has the hardest job. In a brief period of time he means to totally invert the disciples' understanding of what matters. Of what is important. The disciples know all the right words. They are good Hebrews who believe in the coming Messiah and in justice and in righteousness.

But behind these words still remain a greed for power. Jesus counters with a new name: the Human One. The Human One does not begin with the mighty triumph of God but rather starts in the muddle of the created order. The Human One is born of dust. The Human One -- in the most literal rendering -- represents what can be the best in us as people.

For the Human One the last will be first and the first last. Those who warmly welcome and accept the weak and insignificant (as they often thought children were) truly welcome the Human One. For he is them and they are him.

Jesus links the Human One with suffering. Not because he was a fatalist. Not because God wanted him to suffer for the sake of suffering. Jesus identifies the Human One with suffering because true solidarity with the poor and oppressed -- true solidarity with the whole created order -- means jumping in with both feet. Jesus did not seek to reconcile with the powers. To compromise. To take up one's cross meant to politically rebel against the powers of oppression.

The plot to kill Jesus was hatched very early in his ministry; and that Jesus reminds his disciples of this again and again signals not his resignation to die but his clear eyed realism

about how far he was willing to go in his mission.

A mission not defined by power or greed or accumulation. But a mission of forgiveness and mercy and peace. A mission to bring God to all people. A mission to fully embrace creation as nothing more than a mere representative of it. Jesus knew that that mission was radical and dangerous.

This is as Paul wrote in today's lesson from Romans.

*For the creation waits with eager longing  
for the revealing of the children of God;  
... We know that the whole creation has  
been groaning in labor pains until now;  
and not only the creation, but we  
ourselves, who have the first fruits of the  
Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for  
adoption, the redemption of our bodies.  
For in hope we were saved.*

Amen.