

February 25, Lent 2B (Mark 8:31-38)

You've got to feel bad for Peter.

by [E. Carrington Heath](#) in the [January 31, 2018](#) issue

Whenever I preach on a passage that mentions Satan, I get a little uneasy. I didn't grow up in a fundamentalist church, but I grew up in an area so filled with them that what was said in their pulpits sort of spilled out into the rest of the community. My classmates went to churches that preached hellfire and brimstone. They were scared straight into faith by talk of a literal devil who wanted them to burn for all eternity.

That's not the sort of church I serve. I don't want to scare people into faith. I want to focus on loving God because God loves us, not telling people they should love God or else. So when I see a passage like this one from Mark, I am tempted to just avoid the part about Satan and focus on something else.

But it's hard to talk around in this case. Jesus is with one of his favorite disciples, and he starts to explain what's about to happen. Jesus knows he is going to be turned over to the authorities, that he will suffer and be killed—and then rise again.

Peter, understandably, gets upset. He has left everything behind to follow this man, and now he's finding out his friend is going to die. Maybe he's also realizing that if Jesus is going to be killed, his own future doesn't look so great either. He's so afraid that he takes Jesus aside and begins to tell him to stop saying this stuff, to stop talking about death and destruction.

Jesus doesn't just disagree with him, he yells at him, "Get behind me, Satan!"

You've got to feel bad for Peter. He is scared, and he wants to know that it will all turn out OK. Jesus not only doesn't listen to him, he calls him the worst name you can think of. It doesn't seem fair: you tell the Lord you don't want him to die, and he responds by calling you Satan.

But look closer and another meaning comes out. The Hebrew equivalent of the word Jesus calls Peter is *ha-satan*, which doesn't mean "devil" at all. It's not even a proper name, really. It simply means "the accuser" or "the adversary." Jesus isn't saying that Peter is evil incarnate. Peter is being an adversary. He is standing between Jesus and God's plan. So Jesus tells him, "Get behind me." Put your protests aside, and get in line. Don't oppose me; I have to do this.

Peter asks Jesus to compromise what he knows God has called him to do, and Jesus says no. In that moment, Jesus tells Peter all he needs to know. It's not going to be easy, and it's not going to end well, and if Peter is going to stand between Christ and the cross, then he is an adversary.

The question for Peter is whether he's ready to walk with Jesus. Jesus goes on to tell him about the life God has called him to. If you want to be my follower, he says, you have to take up your cross and follow me. Jesus is inviting Peter to either be a disciple or get out of the way.

Almost all of us know what it's like to have an adversary that keeps us from truly being a disciple. It might be an actual person, but more likely your adversary is whatever is standing between you and taking up your cross. It's whatever is keeping you from doing the things God has created you for and called you to do. We call our adversaries by different names: doubt, fear, pride, addiction, hatred, anger, greed, insecurity, and a million others. They may not be the devil we hear about from fundamentalist pulpits, but they have just as much potential to stand between you and God's plan.

And they can be crafty. One young professional I talked to several years ago spoke about how she felt called to devote her life to mission work. Yet she feared doing so because she had grown accustomed to a certain standard of living and feared leaving it, so she never would.

A minister from another denomination told me she felt God was asking her to stand up for an unpopular cause in her area, but she just couldn't work up the courage because she was afraid it would result in her congregation letting her go. She told me, "I believe in dying for a cause, just not this young."

I don't tell these stories as examples of awful people. I tell them because they're a lot like us. We've been there. We've had adversaries that have kept us from taking up our cross and being disciples. We know how hard it can be—and we know that

when we let the adversary win, when we choose safety or comfort or our own gain over the path God has set for us, we rarely find true life. We might get the money, or the promotion, or the knowledge that our job is safe, but do we lose our soul? How much more would we have gained if we had instead said, “Get behind me, Satan”?

Peter, in his own bumbling way, does stop being the adversary. He eventually gets behind Jesus. He takes up his own cross and follows Jesus—and in the end he loses the life he knew, only to gain a new kind of life.

That’s what discipleship is about. It’s about being the person God has called you to be in every arena of your life, every day, not just when things are easy. In Lent you are called to tell the adversary, whatever it happens to be, to get behind you so that you can rise up.