

## **"A Road Less Travelled"**

Mark 8:27-38

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The road is dominant in today's scripture. There are directional signs, warning signs, even roadblocks. There is also a clear opportunity paved for a road less travelled.

Here we encounter a major turning point in the Gospel of Mark. It is the first of three predictions of Jesus' impending death and resurrection, three misinterpretations, and three lessons on discipleship. On this journey we follow Jesus and the disciples to northern Galilee, around Caesarea Philippi, near the source of the Jordan River. Images you have seen this week are from Caesarea Philippi.

*Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ"*

*Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."*

*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."*

This birth had been much more difficult than the others. Bridget opened one groggy eye, then the other, squinting at the round circle of light above her bed. A partition surrounded her like a gauzy white tent. She heard other newborns crying, nurses' starched white uniforms brushing bedside rails. She heard him as soon as he entered the long ward. His heels clicked rapidly across the linoleum.

He poked his head into the partition. As soon as she saw his face, she knew there was something very wrong. "Mrs. Brown, we've got some bad news. The baby is not normal. He is having trouble breathing, and his reflexes are not strong. He may not survive. We don't know what it is. We're so sorry. We've told your husband. He'll be here soon, and we'll bring the wee one to you then. God help you." He left about as abruptly as he entered.

"Mother Mary," she started to pray. She'd had eight healthy children up 'til now. "No! This isn't happening to me!" It wasn't what she needed, one more mouth to feed and maybe lots of extra doctor bills on top of that. The hardest thing, she knew, would be Paddy.

She had been right about Paddy. As the years went by, Paddy had less and less to do with the boy. He ignored Christy, he lost his temper, he rebuked her efforts. "He's no son of mine!" Paddy spat, more than once. Paddy spent more and more time at the pub, smoldering.

Christy couldn't talk or even walk. His whole body was out of control. The doctors said he was an imbecile, never would be able to learn anything, but Bridget continued to hope. She had made a decision way back in that hospital bed. She knew she couldn't be half-hearted about it. It was all or nothing.

So she paid little attention to the doctors. She did what her faith, and her heart told her to do. She treated him just like the other children. She talked to him, read to him. She sang to him, taught him his prayers. She knew he could understand her, just like the others.

Her neighbors thought she was crazy. She didn't care. She had to love him just like the others, even though there were times she

doubted her own sanity. "If I am crazy, so be it."<sup>1</sup>

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All of the sudden, Marvin couldn't see. He'd be peering through his microscope, examining a field specimen, and all would go blank for a moment. At first he thought it was fatigue. By the third time he made an appointment with the ophthalmologist.

"Macular degeneration." Marvin felt like he wasn't even **in** the dimly lit room. It was as though a stranger were seated in that odd chair, surrounded by shining instruments. "What? What are you talking about? I'm only 55! I exercise regularly. I take care of my health. You've obviously got my records mixed up with someone else's!"

"I am afraid not, Marvin. This isn't a guess. The symptoms are clear cut and the films are unequivocal. Yours is a particularly involved case."

"Well, I am not about to sit here and listen to this, this incompetence! I am going to get a second opinion, and that's that."

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Amy had been young and talented and full of dreams. No one in her family had ever even thought about going to college, let alone law school. So many of her professors were behind her, Dr. Bernstein in particular. That frizzy haired poli-sci professor had a wit sharper than his beaked nose. He led Amy through the maze of scholarships, applications, and interviews. Not only was she as bright as any he'd seen in twenty years, she was single-minded. Focused. She worked 24-7. Wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

She'd come from poverty, and there was an edge about her. She was a rising star, anyone could see it. He could see her moving in the halls of power someday, making good her dreams.

Her career took that trajectory. Stanford Law, clerking for O'Connor, a rapid rise through the judiciary. She was up for another huge appointment when it all fell to pieces.

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<sup>1</sup> True story of Christy Brown, a man with cerebral palsy born to Irish parents.

There had been something in her past. Some photos. It happened when she was only eighteen, desperate for funds. It was amazing that it was only now coming to light, but it marked the end of the road for Amy's ambitions.

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It wasn't easy for Bridget, not by a long shot. She shouldered the burden alone. She even had to stop listening to her priest. When Christy turned five, he began to be able to control his foot. Bridget got the idea to put chalk between his toes. She taught him letters, painfully and slowly. He learned to write! And to read! And eventually to speak. She who had never given up on him, she who had denied herself all those years and who had paid no mind to the "experts" or the priests or even her own husband, she who had endured the taunts of neighbors and friends, she, Bridget Brown was vindicated.

Christy Brown went on to become a real artist and a writer and a poet, not in the usual way of men, but with just one left foot. It wasn't all sweetness and light, it was awful along the way lots of times. It didn't end up all that well. Christy died at age 49, neglected by his wife. But there were moments of awareness and ambition, moments of gratitude and grace.

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Marvin's second opinion was worse than the first. His career as a scientific illustrator was over. He could still see in his peripheral vision, so he wasn't completely helpless, but what in the world would he do? Marvin spent about a year feeling sorry for himself; he managed to limp along aimlessly. Until one day his sister, over to help him sort out bills, lit into him. "You've got maybe 20-25 years left. What are you going to do with yourself? You're educated and you have enough money. You can spend the rest of your days regretting your life, shriveling into a bitter old man, or you can do something. What's it gonna be?"

And it was here that Marvin faced the fork in the road that had hit him smack between the eyes a year ago. He took the road less traveled. He mentors at-risk children at Martin Luther King Elementary. The kids couldn't believe it when he told them he'd made a living drawing pictures of plants! He shares his love of science and his love of nature with these kids who haven't ever walked in the

woods. He is, ironically, their eyes to a world they may never see.

Now, he says, he is sometimes grateful for this season of his life. Some days he is even grudgingly grateful for his M.D., as he now calls his macular degeneration. Without it, he would have never known these children and he would have never found this purpose. He's still angry, of course. If he could write the script his way he wouldn't put M.D. in his life, but he knows now in a way he'd never known before that he doesn't get to write the script, he can only choose how he's going to respond to it along the way.

When you start to really listen to people's stories, you realize everyone is on a journey. And if you've lived long enough, you know things almost never turn out the way you think they are going to. Things end. Prosperity, dreams, health, relationships. Even life itself. Sooner or later things will be brought to a screeching halt. Sooner or later there's going to be a difficult road you're going to have to walk down, whether you like it or not. Sooner or later, there's going to be a cross you are going to have to bear, a cross that is heavier and more awful than you can now imagine. Sooner or later, God is going to say, "follow me" and it's going to be worse than hard. It is going to be awful but there also a chance it will be more than awful. There is a chance for wonder and grace, redemption and discovery in the awful wondrousness of it all.

Amy's road ended when a youthful mistake rose up from her past. Amy has found a different path. Not the path of wealth and power, but the way of service and fulfillment. Not the straight path to the top, but the winding, circuitous road to others. She doesn't make a lot of money. She still works 24-7. She's helped a whole lot of women out of a whole pile of trouble. They don't care about those old photos from her past. They don't worry too much about what's around the next bend. They'll cross that bridge when they come to it.

They even have a former prostitute answering the phones.

And to God, who gives us roads and crosses, choices and hope, be the glory. Amen.