

FAITH HEALING: SUFFERING, REJECTION & DEATH

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Mark 8:27-9:1

Over the past decade or so, as a society, we have become more acquainted with the term **confirmation bias**, particularly as it relates to politics. Confirmation bias is the tendency that all of us possess to desire that a certain concept or idea be true. It's like wishful thinking. The drawback of this wishful thinking arises when a person's powerful belief leads them to stop gathering information once they have the proof or evidence they need to confirm their view to be true. They also dismiss any information that might contradict their belief.

The American Psychological Association defines Confirmation Bias as “the tendency to look for information that supports, rather than rejects, one's preconceptions, typically by interpreting evidence to confirm existing beliefs while rejecting or ignoring any conflicting data.”¹

We all do this to one degree or another. We choose to ingest news and opinion from those sources that are more likely to substantiate our personal beliefs. Confirmation bias suggests that we fail to perceive circumstances objectively. We pick out those bits of data that make us feel good because they sustain our prejudices. We become prisoners of our assumptions.²

For example, are you a dog person or a cat person? If you are a dog person, then you are more likely to read the article “Why Dogs Are Better than Cats” than you are the article “Why Cats Are Better than Dogs.” Your bias is working here.

It goes much deeper than just cats and dogs. Researchers at Stanford University devised a study on attitudes towards capital punishment. They included participants who supported capital punishment as well as some who opposed it. All the subjects were provided with the same information—two studies on capital punishment. Even after reading both studies, participants continued to hold their initial beliefs and supported their reasoning by providing “confirming” evidence from the studies and rejecting any contradictory evidence, or considering it inferior to the “confirming” evidence (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

Social networks like Facebook have weaponized our biases. Their algorithms pinpoint each individual's bias and then feed them a steady diet of the information that person wants to see. The networks do this to keep people engaged with their site. The downside is that it makes most people more strident in their beliefs.

¹ <https://dictionary.apa.org/confirmation-bias>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201504/what-is-confirmation-bias>

Today is Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate what we call Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The occasion was the festival of the Passover and thousands of Jews were converging upon that holy city. Jesus and his followers are among these worshipers and part of the great procession of pilgrims heading into the city.

Just outside the city, at the village of Bethany, Jesus acquires a donkey which he rides amidst the procession. The people around him recognize this dramatic image from the scriptures. The prophet Zechariah describes the victorious and triumphant king humbly riding a donkey into Jerusalem. The powerful desire of the people for a savior compels them to shout their hosannas for this image of a king. The people yearned for a king to liberate them from the oppression of Rome and free them to be Israel again. For the duration of the parade, Jesus was indeed king, riding among his people, receiving their accolades. However, by the end of the week, this king would be dead—executed by the Romans. A failure. Jesus had warned that this would happen.

Earlier in this gospel, we read of how Jesus and his disciples are walking between towns. Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. How does the world view him? The disciples say some people get him confused up with John the Baptist. Some people think he is one of the ancient prophets that has returned. Others assume he is a modern prophet.

Jesus then asks this group who they believe him to be. Right away, Peter steps forward and says, *You are the Messiah*. Now, because the Messiah would have been a political figure and a threat to the Romans, Jesus orders the men to keep quiet about this.

Jesus goes on to teach the disciples about his fate. He tells them that he must undergo great suffering, he must be rejected by the religious leaders, and he will be killed. He tells them all of this quite clearly and openly. It is no secret.

Peter will have none of this. He pulls Jesus aside—out of earshot of the others—and tells Jesus that he should not speak like that. He should not talk about suffering, rejection, and dying. That's not what they signed up for. They follow him because he is the messiah, the king, the one who will lead their people to salvation. He will lead them to greatness.

Jesus' response to Peter is firm. He says, *Get behind me, Satan. You are setting your mind on human concerns, not the concerns of God*. Jesus is correct. He is not out of line to call Peter Satan. Satan is anything that opposes God. And at that moment, Peter is opposing God. Jesus speaks the truth about what must take place, and Peter's wishful thinking gets in the way. Peter and the rest want to be great; they don't want to hear about suffering, rejection, and death.

This is not the only time that Jesus will inform the disciples of what will happen to him, of how events must roll out. And each time, the disciples clearly don't get it. Their confirmation bias is that Jesus will lead a revolution and free their people of Roman rule. That is what a Messiah should do. The disciples even have the nerve to ask Jesus which of them will sit at his right hand in glory in the kingdom.

After the incident with Peter, a crowd gathers and Jesus speaks and challenges their confirmation bias. He tells them, *Those who want to follow me must deny themselves and take up their cross*. Like with Peter, this is a pretty terrible recruiting campaign. Why is Jesus telling potential followers about the cross. Certainly, no one comes to him with a plan to be crucified. Why does he bring that up? Messiah or not, is this the person you really want to follow?

Jesus tells the crowd that to save their lives they must lose their lives. But to lose their lives for him is to save their lives. He offers the crowd more of these counter intuitive teachings about being his follower. These teachings of Jesus oppose what people would assume about following a Messiah. It conflicts with their wishful thinking and their confirmation bias. The problem is that the world doesn't understand who he is and what his purpose is. They want so badly to see him as a king riding triumphantly to take his rightful place in the capital.

On this Palm Sunday, it is okay to wave our palms and shout hosanna for our king. But we must keep in mind that despite what we may want, his kingdom is not of this earth.

Through this Season of Lent, I have been preaching this sermon series called Faith Healing. I've been looking at different accounts of healing that we find in scripture. We started with the healing of the paralyzed man whose friends lowered him through the roof to get to Jesus. Then there was Elisha's healing of the foreign general named Naaman. After that, Michael preached on the story of Moses and the healing snake. And then I brought you Jesus healing the man at the Pool of Bethesda. And last week, the healing of the boy possessed by a demon. Today, there is no story of healing (other than possibly Jesus' attempt to heal Peter's blindness of who Jesus really is).

Following Jesus' triumphal ride into Jerusalem, he enters the week of his Passion when he will be betrayed, abandoned, tortured, and executed—all as he predicted. But his death is not meaningless. It serves a purpose.

Jesus could have escaped this fate. On that night in the garden, instead of being captured, he could have disappeared into the darkness. Part of him prayed for a different outcome. But he didn't run. He gave himself because his death pays the debt of our sins—a debt we can never pay ourselves. Because Jesus surrendered his life, we have the opportunity to reside in his kingdom—his true kingdom. The stories of healing that we find in scripture are the evidence of the great power that

exists to change lives, to save lives, to open the gates of God's realm. Through Jesus, God shows us that God can heal the sick and disabled and the broken. When Jesus is brought back from death, it should not surprise us that God's power to heal has no limits. It is the greatest source of reassurance for me to know that all are recipients of God's mercy and candidates for God's healing. If God can defeat death, then certainly God can save me.

To be healed for God's kingdom may also bring suffering, rejection, and death as we choose to follow Jesus. Following Jesus means taking up our own cross and walking with him. But then we will understand who he is and we can follow him shouting hosanna. Amen.