

“Who Is Influencing You?”



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Mark 8: 27b-29

And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.”

Mark 9: 38-41

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Psalms 19: 7-14

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
⁸the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;

the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent;^[a]
do not let them have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Many of us have likely heard the story of the Isle of Sirens. The sirens were female creatures, part human and part bird, who sang siren songs so that as sailors passed by they would hear them singing and be tempted or influenced so that they would jump overboard and lose their lives as their bodies would be dashed on the rocks. The isle is a real place. It is the Island of Capri located on the southern side of the gulf of Naples.

Greek mythology tells us the story of an ancient war hero by the name of Ulysses. Ulysses, as he was traveling home from the Trojan war, he wanted to hear the Sirens' song although he knew that in doing so would render him incapable of rational thought. So, he put wax in his men's ears so that they could not hear and had them tie him to the mast so that he could not jump into the sea. He ordered them not to change course under any circumstances, and to keep their swords upon him to attack him if he should break free of his bonds. Upon hearing the Sirens' song, Ulysses was driven temporarily insane and struggled with all his might to break free so that he

might join the Sirens, which would have meant his death for the influence of the siren song was so strong.

My question for today is who is influencing you? What songs have you heard in your life? Who was singing them? Were you able to resist or did you fall prey to their influence?

While I am not big into Greek mythology, this story of Ulysses and the Isle of Sirens is a metaphor for how the songs of this world sings to us. Songs that, if followed, could lead us to self-aggrandizement, personal power, seeking what we want rather than what God would want for us and from us.

Rev. Henry Emerson Fosdick wrote a book entitled, The Manhood of the Master. Listen to a quote from his writing:

Only by a stronger passion can evil passions be expelled, and... a soul unoccupied by a positive devotion is sure to be occupied by spiritual demons. When Ulysses passed the Isle of Sirens, he had himself tied to the mast and had his ears stopped with wax, that he might not hear the sirens singing—a picture of many a man's pitiful attempts after negative goodness. But when Orpheus passed the Isle of Sirens, he sat on the deck, indifferent, for he too was a musician and could make melody so much more beautiful than the sirens, that their alluring songs were to him discords. Such is the Master's life of positive goodness, so full, so glad, so triumphant, that it has conquered sin by surpassing it. Have you such a saving positiveness of loyal devotion in your life?

In Mark's gospel beginning with chapter 8 and finishing at chapter 10 Jesus is doing some influencing of His own. He is trying to influence the disciples so that they had a solid understanding of who he was and who they were to become.

In our text what we see is that the disciples were worried. There was someone out there casting out demons in Jesus' name. He wasn't one of them. Who was this person? Scripture does not tell us. Perhaps this was a person who had heard Jesus speak when he preached his sermon on the mount or was present when Jesus himself was casting out demons.

The disciples were greatly worried over the influence this 'someone' was having. Clearly it was someone that was not with Jesus day and night like the disciples had been. It was not someone who was part of Jesus' inner circle. Perhaps the disciples were more than a little upset because they had tried to cast a demon out of a boy and couldn't. Now here is this 'someone' casting out demons. The disciples said to Jesus that this 'someone' was not following them. Likely they were worried about the influence this person was having on others.

Jesus knew who was to be influencing who. Jesus was sent to be the influence upon our world and upon us. From Mark gospel chapters 8 & 9 we see the disciples trying to influence Jesus and influence how God was to be at work in this world. This is one of those places in scripture that I would love to hear Jesus say something like, "excuse me, so you (disciples) are trying to instruct the Lord of all creation how things are to go? Well then, let me sit down, you run things and let's see how that works." Yet how often do we still hear people making decisions for God such as whose in and whose out when we are to allow God through God's word and God's spirit to influence us.

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That influence from all sorts of places is still there. Companies spend millions of dollars on retail ads trying to influence what product we purchase. Candidates try to influence our vote. News media can be a source of influence. During this pandemic think of how influence has contributed heavily to people's decisions whether to receive a vaccination or not. As parents and grandparents, we work to make sure that our children have solid influences in their lives. Your next pastor will be an influence on this church.

But remember that Rev. Fosdick referenced in his writing another story from the Isle of Siren. It was about Orpheus. In Greek Mythology Orpheus was a musician taught by the gods to play music. Orpheus was on a ship when they also passed the dangerous isle of the Sirens. Orpheus was the greatest

of all musicians with his music being peace filled and loving. His music was so peace filled and loving that when any people began to argue, Orpheus would begin to stroke his lyre and calm the argument. (Maybe we can think of several places where we would love to have someone with that sort of gift – I know I can.)

As the ship with Orpheus on board came close to the rocky island of the Sirens, no one had their ears plugged with wax, Orpheus simply began a splendid song so that the crew was intent on the peace filled and loving song that Orpheus sang thereby were not distracted by the song of the sirens and sailed safely past.

Jesus didn't want the disciples to be distracted; Jesus wanted them to be focused. It is one of the reasons that he asks them, "who do people say that I am?" It was a tool used by Jesus to bring the disciples attention back to realizing that they were in the company of the Son of God. Jesus needed them focused for the days that were yet to come. Jesus wanted them to learn about the influencers that they would face. Jesus knew that their mission and ours can get dashed upon the rocks.

One of my own stories of hearing the sirens in my life was in the latter 1990's when I was in seminary. Some people were convinced that Jesus was coming in the year 2000 so why waste my time at seminary? These sirens would have had me quit school, return to the church where I served as a children's minister. What it would have done was to derail how God intended to use my life.

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In Psalm 19 that Kathy read for us this morning, David is saying the world is full of troubles and woes such as feeling attacked by others and vulnerable. David said that what he did to stay focused was to celebrate the goodness, generosity, and life-giving power of Yahweh's Torah. The commandments are not moral insinences. They are God word to be used in the shaping of creation which is required if life in the earth is to be safe and prosperous.

The psalmist says that the word of God restores selfhood, makes wise, gives joy, enlightens our eyes, is sweeter than honey so that the words of our mouth and the things we think in our hearts are acceptable to God. According to David it is the positive devotion that is to influence us.

So think today – who is influencing you and how are you being an influence in this world for God.

Let us pray,

Holy One, every day through friends, family, neighbors, media we are bombarded by people who would want to influence how we think and the decisions we make. Many of our influencers are there trying to lead us to that positive devotion to God but sometimes in our humanity we listen to the songs of the sirens, we become occupied by thoughts that do not lead to a wholeness of life in you. This day let us be reminded that we are to be those people who live for others the goodness, generosity and life giving power of your word. Amen