

February 25, 2024
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalms 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

In the Name of the One, Holy and Living God. Amen.

Today, in our travels with Jesus through the gospel of Mark, we come to a big bump in the road. Today, Jesus predicts his death for the first time. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering,” Jesus tells his disciples. He must “be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

If there was ever a moment for us to say, “wait...what?” this is it. Jesus was the great healer, teacher, and wonderworker. Jesus had been talking about a glorious new kingdom that would come and last forever. Jesus was the answer to all their problems. How can this “good news” hero announce such gruesome bad news? That he’s going to walk into a death trap...on purpose. This is insane.

Peter, of course it’s Peter, takes Jesus aside to rebuke him, to scold him for being too grisly, too ghastly, too contrary to the disciples’ expectations. Jesus’ response we know well: “Dude, get behind me, you’re facing the wrong direction.”

Then Jesus turns to the gathered crowd, saying, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” And there it is, the Cross – maybe not so much of a bump in the road, as a roadblock. In a poem called “The Crosse” the 17th century poet George Herbert asks, “What is this strange and uncouth thing?”¹ For many, the Cross is such an uncouth thing, such a vulgar object, that we spend all our time looking for ways around it.

I think our ears get so stuck on “deny” and “cross” that we forget that this is an invitation. God’s grace always begins with an invitation, like the invitation to Sarah and Abraham. God’s invitation to us is an ever-deepening relationship of following Jesus...who was, as the text reminds us, raised from the dead.

So, what is the relationship that Jesus invites us to through the Cross today? Haven’t we already had enough of loss and grief and fear and loneliness? Isn’t another

¹ George Herbert, *The Crosse*.

Lent under the dark clouds of political violence and war grim enough? Why is Jesus still inviting us to die in order to live, to lose in order to save?

At this juncture, one temptation might be to minimize, the sort of “I already gave at the office” approach to Lent. Giving up a dessert here or there, unplugging from the internet occasionally. Maybe a little more prayer, a little more almsgiving, a little more volunteer work. These are all good things, but I think that “Lent Lite” falls far short of what Jesus is calling us to. Look what happened to Peter when he suggested a shortcut.

Another temptation might be to maximize, to go for a full court press in Lent. We all know people who seem to glory in misery or to become “so heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good.” This sort of self-denial strips life of any pleasure, any embodiment, any joy. Such single-mindedness reduces the world to a landscape to be conquered with determined, but loveless, zeal. There is also a dangerous kind of self-denial that can tempt folks to remain in unhealthy or abusive relationships, imagining that Jesus wants them not for a sunbeam, but for a doormat.

Is there an in-between? What is the self that Jesus calls us to deny? Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and mystic, talks at length about the false self, which is at odds with the true self. The false self is who we think we are, based on other people’s perceptions, our “status” in society, or who we have been told we are from an early age. The true self is who we are as God sees us. Merton writes, “Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the [person] that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about [them].”²

Merton writes that by putting our false self between God and our true identity we mentally recreate the entire universe in our own image and likeness, not God’s.³ When we think of ourselves as completely autonomous self-serving units, we find ourselves stranded, and alone. In Mark’s language, this is setting our minds “not on divine things but on human things.”

This false self is the self that Jesus calls on us to deny, as he invites us to follow him into a relationship with the self that God created, the self that God sees. Is this easy? No. Can we manage it under our own steam? No. Our friend Peter might give us some hope today. Peter reminds us that we’re all inadequate and inept most of the time. Peter reminds us that we are not saved by our ingenuity. We are saved by God’s grace ... through Jesus.

² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 34.

³ Merton, *The New Man*, p. 117.

As Paul writes to the Colossians (1:19-20), “For in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

When God raised Jesus after three days, the Cross, George Herbert’s “strange and uncouth thing” became instead the Tree of Life, the life that Jesus invites us to follow him into today.

Accepting Jesus’ invitation to follow him by taking up your cross (not his cross, not someone else’s cross, but yours) is not a one-and-done thing. Neither are we called to stroll through life, following the path of least resistance. Following in the footsteps of Jesus is a matter of countless choices and decisions made over a lifetime.

Every day, we find ourselves at any number of crossroads – the pun is very much intended. At each crossroad, decisions must be made. We must decide which direction to turn, which self to deny – the one I created, or the one God created. Every decision we make is about being conformed to the world or being transformed by God. Further down the road, we become more aware of the suffering of others – near and far, like and unlike – making more decisions to see that the suffering of any is the suffering of us all. The choice then becomes to live for oneself, or to live for all of God’s children.

I want to offer you a poem/hymn that came into my life not too many years ago. It’s written by John Bell (b. 1949), a Scottish hymn-writer and Church of Scotland minister. He is a member of the Iona Community, an ecumenical community based on the Isle of Iona, one of the oldest religious centers in Western Europe.

In this poem, called *The Summons*, I hope you might hear the gentle, yet persistent, invitation of a God who calls you each by name. You will hear many, many ways in which you might be called to follow Christ. Please don’t get stuck in thinking that it’s a checklist (where you must make sure all the boxes are ticked), or a test (where you must get all the answers right). Instead, listen for the invitation that speaks to your deepest heart, in your deepest self.

The Summons

Will you come and follow Me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let My love be shown, will you let My name be known,
Will you let My life be grown in you and you in Me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let Me answer pray'r in you and you in Me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the pris'ners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean in you and you in Me?

Will you love the "you" you hide if I but all your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
Through My sight and touch and sound in you and you in Me?

Lord, Your summons echoes true when You but call my name.
Let me turn and follow You and never be the same.
In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and You in me.

My friends in Christ, Lent is a time of invitation. The gift of God's grace always begins with an invitation, by name, to you – an invitation into an ever-deepening relationship with God as your true self, the self that God made. The time is now. Can you hear it? Will you follow? Amen.