

Year B
Lent 2, February 27, 2021
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

For just a minute, imagine that you are Jesus's disciple Peter. You and your companions are following the most compelling teacher you have ever met—a man who heals the sick, makes the blind to see, the deaf to hear, feeds multitudes with a handful of food, and gives hope to an oppressed people. A few moments before the story in today's gospel, you had just stated to Jesus, "You are the Messiah," the great statement of faith. And Jesus acknowledged the truth of your statement by telling you that the information must be a secret for now. That might not be so hard to accept—timing is everything, right? You might think, "well, Jesus will come into his power when the time is right. Then the Romans will be overthrown, and The Messiah will correct all injustices and bring about universal peace. Everyone knows that the Messiah is a military leader, And I will be at his right hand. Didn't he give me the name Peter? Aren't I his "rock"? For a few moments you could have basked in that "knowledge" but then Jesus starts talking about his great suffering, his rejection and his death. You say, "Wait, what?!! No—no that's not right."

You take Jesus aside, and rebuke him. "Rabbi, no—you are our hope for peace and justice! You can't mean that YOU are going to be rejected. No, the Lord is with you, and will give you power and might, and you will trample down our enemies—dominate them—and I'll help you, we all will help you."

And instead of putting his arm around you, and saying, "Peter, my friend, of course you're right—what am I saying!" Jesus turns away from you, and says "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Stunning. Horrifying. Humiliating. But Jesus is making a major point. Because Peter gets it SO wrong. Yes, he and the disciples must have been devastated to hear that the Messiah was going to save the world by dying for it, not by killing for it. And they were going to lose their rabbi, and the Messiah. It was unacceptable. And we can certainly sympathize with them, can't we? Because it would be just as unacceptable today. Today "the world" *still* values prestige and power not suffering and dying.

Remember, in a different gospel, when Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days being tempted by Satan? Satan offered him just the things that Peter probably thought the Messiah should have: angels at his side to feed and protect him, and all the kingdoms of the world under his control. Peter is speaking for Satan here.

Peter was blinded to Jesus' purpose because of his own preconceptions. He had it all worked out in his own mind the way he *wanted* things to be, and this made it impossible for him to see how things *had to be*. How often do WE do this? How often do we have a plan that seems to be the only way to go, that when there is a different idea, we can't accept, or sometimes can't even see it?

Recently I was ministering to a woman in the ICU who had been sick and on the ventilator, the machine that breathes for you, for so long that her lungs were just not able to do their own work anymore. She had been taken off the vent three different times on three different days, and had not been able to breathe on her own effectively. Each time she was almost immediately put back on the ventilator. Her husband was told that she would have to have a tracheostomy, and have the ventilator permanently installed in the lower part of her throat if she were to survive. She'd also have to have a tube installed in her stomach, in order to be fed. This full life support situation would be permanent, and she'd have to live the rest of her life in a long-term acute care hospital about three hours away.

This news was devastating to her husband, but he saw no alternative, and he began to make plans for her transfer, determining how often he could visit, who would take care of the dog when he was gone, and so forth. No one thought to ask the patient what she wanted—it was just taken for granted that she would agree, because the alternative was to die. But it turned out that she didn't want to spend the rest of her life in bed, hooked up to life support, isolated from her husband, unable to see any of the people she loved, or do any of the things she enjoyed. On a clipboard she wrote to her husband and me "That's not living." Her husband was stunned speechless. He could not accept that she would choose an immediate, peaceful death over life on machines.

Sometimes we just can't see—or accept—anything other than our own idea. But Jesus makes it clear that the way of the cross is his way. Not only that, but it is the way for anyone who wants to follow him. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Crucifixion was an always-visible sign of Roman domination of the Jews. It was their way of communicating their power without saying a word. In the year 6, for instance, when Jesus was a boy, we know that the Romans crucified 2,000 Galileans who

rose up against their oppression. We also know that those crucified were forced to carry their own crossbar to the place where the large upright post was fixed into the ground. Then the crosspiece was lashed to the upright, and the victim was nailed to it. Nowadays, we sometimes hear that something is someone's cross to bear—meaning it's an annoyance. But when Jesus says “take up your cross,” he means “be willing to die,” and the disciples and the crowd knew it.

Throughout history, then, Christians have known this, and there have been times and places when they have been willing to do it. You know that many of our saints were martyrs. Even today there are Christians all over the world who are killed because they are followers of Jesus. But as Americans we have the incredible luxury to worship God in peace. We don't have to risk our lives to follow Jesus, so what does this mean for us? What is Jesus saying to us?

Listen again to what Jesus says: “let them deny themselves... For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Deny ourselves and follow Jesus. Love the way Jesus did, value the things that Jesus valued, and don't focus on *the self*. And don't be ashamed that Jesus' way is your way. The early Christians called following Jesus The Way—they were followers of The Way of Jesus. Their belief in the saving love of Jesus, and his sacrifice, and resurrection, inspired a new way of life. Today, it should be the same; denying ourselves and following Jesus should inspire a change of life.

And so what do you have so fixedly in your mind that it's hard to see any alternative? How am I so focused on myself that I don't see The Way of Jesus? How can we deny ourselves, and walk in love, as Jesus did?

The couple that I mentioned earlier eventually did come to an understanding. The patient was able to help her husband see that the loving thing for him to do would be to allow all of her life support to be removed, and hold her as she died peacefully, surrounded by her family, there in the ICU. Which is what he did.

Amen

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