



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 2 (B)

The Most Difficult Path to Follow

[RCL] Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Imagine the scene. You are one of the group of Galileans who have been singled out to follow the most compelling teacher ever to walk the stony hills of your land. You have been with your beloved leader, the one you call Master or Rabbi, for nearly three years now, and increasingly, you watch as more people come to hear him, entranced by his message about God as a loving father, people longing to be fed, some with words of comfort and many of them literally. And then there are those miserable ones who are sick or blind, who take up his time, but he gives it freely, healing them and giving them sight in the process. But you, you are not one of the crowd, you are the one who just recently has had his name changed from Simon to Peter. You are Petros, the rock, the stone chosen and cut and named by your beloved Master. You declared the conviction of your heart to him when he asked that stirring question: “Who do you say that I am?” And you, Simon the fisherman, you were the one with the proper answer. “You are the Messiah.”

So now that all of us have imagined the scene and have, somehow, identified with Peter at his triumphant moment of revelation and stunning declaration, let us move with him to the scene that follows. Already, halfway into Mark’s Gospel, we are entering the second part that concentrates on Jesus’ passion. In today’s passage, we are given the first prediction of suffering and death in Mark’s singular style of brevity and immediacy. “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed . . .” “What? Did he say killed?” The disciples forget all their preoccupations, look at each other stunned, fail to hear the end of the prediction, and then turn to Peter because Jesus seems removed, deep in thought—probably in prayer, they think, for he seems to be always connected to Someone else, always praying. And Peter takes charge again. This simply will not do. No one had ever spoken of the Messiah as having to suffer. After all, the word Messiah, Anointed, is a triumphant word. He grasps Jesus by the arm to move him a bit away from the others, and Jesus allows this, listens to him as Peter rebukes him. What is Peter saying? What does the word rebuke mean? Something like this, perhaps: “How can you speak of suffering and death? Didn’t we agree just the other day that you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God? and you did not dispute it when I declared it to you. Why are you frightening us? Look at all the crowds following you.”

Jesus does not answer him immediately. He pulls away from Peter and turns to look at his disciples, these people he has loved and taught for so many months, the ones on whom he has pinned his hopes that the vision of the kingdom that has set him on fire will do the same for them and that they will continue his mission. He sees that they are stunned and frightened, but mostly confused. He knows that he has the power to change his own course and to comfort them. He remembers his forty days in the wilderness, Satan tempting him with power. *Look, if you align with me all these kingdoms will be yours. Just say the word. Forget the one who is pulling you to himself, always to himself, forget your father.* Jesus addresses Peter, but his eyes are on all his faithful disciples, for they all matter. If they don't understand, no one will. "Get behind me, Satan!" he cries out again as he did in the wilderness, directly to Peter, reversing what he had told him in their previous encounter. Now his meaning is just as clear: "Peter, you are thinking of all this in human terms. You are thinking of human power and armies and wealth, and even of violence. But the ways of God are different. Don't you know this? Haven't I spoken to you about God's kingdom?" He sees Peter's anger and then confusion and immediately his great sadness. And he knows that his dear disciple will go through much agony of spirit and grief before he understands. Now he must teach all of them once again, he must make them understand the values of the kingdom.

His first words are terrible. Do you want to follow me? It will not be easy. I am not promising you power or wealth or importance. First, you recognize that God is the center of your existence, not you, yourself. "Take up your cross," he tells them, "and follow me."

In our days, this command is used profanely. "I too have my cross to bear," someone says of a simple annoyance, and we who have been confronted by the gospel cringe. But in that day, Jesus' listeners knew what the sentence meant in all its horror. The condemned had to carry their own means of the most horrid death to their crucifixion. This was an awful saying to the ears who first heard it. They knew the reality of Roman cruelty. Later they would come to recognize their teacher's words more fully: "If you can recognize your own self-centeredness and then discard it, you may follow me. If you understand that the life I call you to lead may cause your own death, you may follow me."

They quickly learned what we are invited to learn every day. The life we are called to live as Christ-followers is filled with paradox. We gain by losing. We are saved by dying to self. The first become last. The last, the despised, become first. This is no happiness gospel. This is no prosperity gospel. We are not called to make millions while others go hungry. We are not called to live in mansions when others have nowhere to lay their heads.

The gospel of Christ is not casual. It is not reserved for those who say the right words while their lives speak of prestige and power. The beautiful psalm appointed for today was composed by someone who understood this kind of justice that lives in the heart of the Creator.

"For he does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;
neither does he hide his face from them;
but when they cry to him he hears them."

It may not seem that way in this unequal and unjust society of ours. In times of distress, we ask: “Does God not hear us?” And then we remember Gethsemane and Christ’s tears and sweat, and then, the terrible silence. Yet, he did pick up his own cross and obeyed.

The Old Testament Lesson and St. Paul speak of faith and covenants and promises fulfilled because of Abraham’s trust in God. Jesus’ trust in God brought him to the cross. It is the only way we have for understanding what he means when he warns us of the cost of following him. And yet, who would not want to follow him? As Peter said when inspired by the Holy Spirit, “You, Lord, you alone have the words of life eternal.” Thanks be to God.

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