

Sunday, February 28, 2021
Second Sunday in Lent (Year B)

Mark 8.31-38

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/5059480197457501>

(Sermon begins at about 13:40)

“Taking Up Our Cross”

A couple of weeks ago, when we talked about the Transfiguration, we talked about how that was a pivot point in Jesus’ life and ministry. When his focus changed from being about his ministry of teaching and healing to being about his journey to Jerusalem. The journey we make with him during the season of Lent. Well, the real shift actually took place six days before the Transfiguration, in the events we hear in today’s Gospel. When Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he will undergo great suffering, be killed, and then rise again. The first of three Passion predictions.

To fully understand—to more fully appreciate—what is going on in today’s Gospel we need to step back a few verses. Just before this scene, Jesus asked his disciples, “‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’” (Mk 8.27-29). This helps shed a little light on just why things get a little tense in today’s Gospel. That after Jesus tells his disciples about what will happen to him, Peter seems to freak out and rebukes Jesus for saying such things. Jesus in turn rebukes Peter, saying “Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mk 8.33).

So why would Peter rebuke Jesus for telling the truth about what is going to happen to him? Perhaps it was because Peter had a different understanding of Messiah than Jesus did. Under the contemporary understanding, the Messiah would be a great military leader, a king, who would liberate the people and return Israel to its former glory. Such a Messiah would not be put to death, as Jesus predicted. Or perhaps it was because Peter could not bear the thought of his friend, his rabbi, his mentor, undergoing such a fate. Or more likely, it was a combination of the two.

Jesus’ reaction, “Get behind me Satan,” seems a bit harsh, particularly in response to a statement uttered out of love and concern. But there’s probably several layers to this reaction. First, as we discussed last week, immediately after Jesus’ baptism, he spent 40 days in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. During those 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus was tempted and tested by Satan, in an attempt to turn him away from the ministry he was to do. In an attempt to turn him away from God. So, even though it has been a few years since that experience, Jesus’ struggles with Satan were probably still fresh in his mind. Particularly as he was now shifting his focus from his ministry of teaching and healing to a focus on his Passion, which would again entail going up against the powers of evil and darkness. So, just as

Satan had attempted to stand in the way of Jesus' mission, so too is Peter now attempting to stand in the way of Jesus' mission, painful though it may be.

The other layer to Jesus' reaction is actually a little gentler on Peter. The ancient understanding of Satan, as we see elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures—most notably in the Book of Job—is that Satan was not originally the personification of evil that we associate with the name, but was really a generic role or function. For the ancient Hebrews, *satan* was merely a term that meant “accuser” or “adversary,” derived from a verb that means “to obstruct” or “to oppose.” Not a symbol of evil. When used with the definite article (“the”), the term “the satan”, or in Hebrew, *ha-satan*, denotes something more specific. In this case, a heavenly prosecutor. A being in the heavenly court responsible for prosecuting the nation of Judah and testing the loyalty of God's followers. Still not a symbol of evil. It was only in the few hundred years before the time of Jesus that, under the influence of other Near Eastern religions, the concept of *ha-satan* morphed into what we now think of as Satan—the personification of evil.¹

All that to say that in referring to Peter as Satan, Jesus was likely using the more ancient imagery of one who obstructs. In other words, telling Peter that he was standing in Jesus' way, seeking to prevent him from doing what he was meant to do. And in saying, “Get behind me Satan,” he really would have been telling Peter that he needed to get out of the way. That he needed to get behind Jesus as in get behind him and support him. As in get behind him and follow him.

This makes more sense in light of what comes next. After rebuking Peter, Jesus turns his attention to the disciples and the gathered crowd: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8.34). This statement and what follows can be a little uncomfortable for many of us to hear. It is particularly the part about “taking up our cross” that can be most concerning. This statement that we must take up our cross in order to follow Jesus has often been taken out of context. It has often been used as a mindless, even insensitive, platitude to those who experience suffering in their lives. The current translation might be something akin to “just suck it up. What you're going through is nothing compared to what Jesus went through.” Not the most pastoral of responses. Not exactly a helpful sentiment in winning souls for the kingdom of God. Who wants to be part of an outfit that requires suffering?

Now, there's no denying that there is suffering in the world. We all have those things in our lives that cause us to suffer. Sometimes those things cause minor irritations, and sometimes they cause great anguish, be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or a combination thereof. Things that we often hear referred to as “our cross to bear.” But when Jesus says that to be his followers we need to take up our cross, he doesn't mean that we need to embrace the suffering, to hold on to it like a badge of honor. He does not mean that we are to seek out additional suffering in order to follow him. He does not mean that we are to be passive victims in our suffering. After all, that would be completely contrary to everything he believed in and did throughout his public ministry. A ministry that focused on healing. A ministry that was first and foremost about relieving people of their suffering, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual.

And even beyond that, consider what happens at the end of his life. Jesus willingly goes to the cross on our behalf, so that through his suffering and death, we might be spared suffering and death. So that through his suffering and death and Resurrection, he defeats sin and death. Through his death on the cross and his Resurrection, he defeats sin and death so that we would no longer need to suffer their effects. In short, that we are forgiven, we are healed, we are given eternal life. Jesus took an instrument of torture and death and through his death and Resurrection transformed it into a symbol of hope and promise. He transformed the cross into a symbol of health and wholeness.

So, no, it does not make sense that when Jesus tells the crowd—tells us—that we need to take up our cross and follow him, that he is calling us to needlessly bear our suffering. Or worse yet, to seek out suffering as proof of our worthiness to follow him. Rather, he is calling us to be active participants in seeking to end our suffering. He is calling us to follow him on a path that will lead to health and wholeness. He is inviting us to follow him on a journey in which he will ultimately take away our cross, our suffering, and transform it into something new and lifegiving. Just as he transformed the physical cross into a symbol of something new and lifegiving. Just as he transformed the cross into the way to forgiveness, to health and wholeness, to new and eternal life.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus makes the first prediction of his Passion. That he would suffer. That he would be killed. But also, that he would rise from the dead. Of course, we know that all this centered around the cross. Given that he uses the image of us needing to take up our cross to follow him implies that he also knew that his Passion would center around the cross. Otherwise, use of that image of his followers taking up their crosses just would have seemed random, out of context. And even though this is a journey he can only complete on his own, he still invites his followers to accompany him as far they were able. To the foot of the cross. Not to be placed on it. Not to share in the fate he would suffer, but to witness just what it is that he is going to do for us. To be recipients of the healing and liberation, to be beneficiaries of the forgiveness and salvation, to be partners in the restoration and new life, that will be realized at the end of his journey. That will be brought to reality once Jesus' lifeless body is taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb.

Our Lenten journey is a reminder of the journey that Jesus took to Jerusalem. It is a reminder that, even 2,000 years later, we make that journey to the cross along with Jesus. This is a journey that he has invited us to make with him. A journey in which we get behind him and follow him, every step of the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. In his invitation, he asks us to bring something on our journey. He invites us to bring our own cross—the sufferings that we have accumulated over the years. But while the journey ends at the cross of the crucifixion, there is only one person who takes his place on that cross. Who takes the place for all of us. The rest of us, carrying our own crosses, are invited to place those crosses at the foot of the true cross. Knowing that following his death, Jesus' lifeless body will be placed in the tomb. That in his death, our own crosses, our own sufferings, will also be placed in the tomb. A tomb which, after three days, will be found empty. Completely empty.

¹ "Satan," Wikipedia, February 18, 2021. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satan>.