

Sunday, February 25, 2024
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/715192813797068>

(Sermon begins at about 24:10)

“Take Up Your Cross”

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Excuse me? You want me to . . . to do what?

These words of Jesus to his disciples, and to the entire assembled crowd, are admittedly a bit startling. Particularly to a group of Jews in first century Palestine. The image of taking up a cross would have naturally brought to mind crucifixion. The preferred form of torture and execution for the occupying Roman forces. Something Jesus’ audience rightly feared. And while we may not live in fear of the prospect of crucifixion in our own time, we still cringe—even if only slightly—at the prospect of having to 1) deny ourselves, and 2) to take up our cross. That does not sound like something any of us would willingly do. And yet, in this Lenten season, and indeed in our ongoing lives of faith, taking up our cross is precisely what we should be doing.

To understand what this means and why it is important to our lives of faith—and particularly to our Lenten journey—we need to unpack what is going on in this Gospel scene. For starters, we need to step back to look at what happened immediately before today’s pericope. You all know the story. Jesus goes to his disciples and asks them, “‘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).

Then, as we hear in our Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells them what being Messiah really means. Knowing full well that his followers, devout Jews that they were, would have subscribed to the conventional understanding of Messiah as a warrior king in the model of King David who would swoop in, vanquish the enemy—in this case, the Roman Empire—liberate the people, reestablish the kingdom of Israel, and usher in a new golden age. So, to disabuse of them this understanding, he tells them that no, he “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Undoubtedly a shock to all the disciples. As we heard, Peter then rebukes Jesus, who fires back with “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Of course, Jesus does not think Peter is Satan. The use of this term is intentional. Jesus is drawing a stark contrast between Peter’s understanding of Messiah and Jesus’ understanding. He is not saying Peter is evil, but rather is invoking the image of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness that we heard last week. Likening Peter to Satan in his role as tempter—the one who tempted Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, where he was tempted with power, wealth,

and glory. Here, implying that Peter is seeking to tempt Jesus with the allure and associated benefits of the traditional understanding of Messiah as a great warrior in the model of King David. That Peter's vision is one rooted in human values and desires, not in keeping with the divine plan. The divine plan Jesus has just laid out.

That divine plan applies not just to Jesus in his role as Messiah. It also applies to all those who follow the Messiah. Jesus takes this as an opportunity to educate the disciples and all who would seek to follow him what it means to be his follower. So guess what? If the true meaning of Messiah is not that of a new King David but rather is one who will suffer and be rejected, be killed, and rise again, then the true meaning of being a follower of the Messiah will also not be in keeping with what they expected.

Hence his statement that "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Not what any of them would have expected of one who follows the Messiah. And yet, this simple image of taking up the cross would have been particularly vivid in the minds of the disciples. And startling, in light of the revelation Jesus has just made about his own impending death. While he did not specifically mention the means of his death, they all undoubtedly would have seen crucifixion as a possibility for Jesus, given the fact that what he was preaching was critical of the policies of the Roman Empire; and therefore as being considered treasonous. And now, they are probably thinking that, as his followers, they too might be subject to the same fate.

Yet, this is not really what Jesus meant. Not take up the cross in the literal sense. This was meant to be symbolic, using the specter of the cross as an image for something greater, something more expansive. Placing what it means to follow the Messiah in this revised context. As one commentator notes:

Jesus puts forward this difficult teaching in direct counterpoint to the conventional view of the Messiah as a military conqueror. In effect, "take up your cross" is meant as a contrast to "vanquish your enemies," whether those enemies are military, personal, or otherwise; "deny yourself" is meant as a contrast to "arrogate power for yourself!" In other words, Jesus contends that the heart of one conventional view of messiahship is a self-centered attempt to seize advantage over others—and he will have none of it. In Mark, Jesus' path is a way of humility, forgiveness, healing, and liberation, not grasping, vengeance, dominance, and destruction.¹

So, distilling it all down, this new vision of Messiah that Jesus embodies is a path characterized by humility, forgiveness, healing, and liberation. All of which Jesus will demonstrate through the taking up of his own cross in Jerusalem. But central to the idea of the Messiah taking up the cross in humility in order to bring about forgiveness, healing, and liberation, is the recognition that he takes up the cross on our behalf. Precisely because the Messiah takes up the cross, those who follow him will NOT be required to. That in his taking up the cross on our behalf, for our benefit, we are gifted with forgiveness, healing, and liberation. A gift we humbly receive with profound gratitude.

So why Jesus' statement that "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."?

In Jesus' time, crucifixion was a means of torture and execution that was reserved for those deemed by the Empire to be revolutionaries, to be treasonous. For those who sought to go against what the Empire stood for. In short, crucifixion was the punishment for being countercultural. So, when Jesus calls his followers to take up their cross, he is calling them to be countercultural, even revolutionary. To buck the status quo. In his statement, Jesus is telling his followers they need to follow his example. Not in terms of going to the cross. As I said, he already did that on our behalf. Yet, in gratitude, we are called to live out those same characteristics he exhibited. We are invited to be countercultural, even revolutionary. That we are to deny our own petty self-interests, our self-centeredness, our hubris, our arrogance, our enslavement to the ways of the world. Instead, as his followers, we are, as Christ did, to seek to embody humility, forgiveness, healing, and liberation in our own lives and in our own relationships. In so doing, we are being proactive, following Jesus in the path that promises health and wholeness, liberation, restoration, and new life.

Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. In Jesus' time, or in ours. To do so was and continues to be countercultural, even revolutionary. In Jesus' time, to do so was potentially life-threatening—literally necessitating taking up the cross of crucifixion. But in our own day, in an increasingly secular society that is more concerned with looking out for number one as opposed to loving our neighbors as ourselves, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, to follow Jesus, is no less countercultural, no less revolutionary, than in Jesus' time.

Jesus describes his vision and understanding of what it means to be Messiah: to embody humility, forgiveness, healing, and liberation. Countercultural in any age. Revolutionary to be sure. He then describes what that means for those who follow him. In so doing, he encourages and invites us to join him in making that vision of the kingdom of God that his messiahship will usher in a reality. We begin to do so on this, our Lenten journey, as we accompany Jesus to Jerusalem, leading to the cross and the tomb, where this new reality begins to unfold. What we heard today helps to orient us to the road we will be traveling through the remainder of Lent and beyond, as we embody and live into this new reality.

¹ "Cross Purposes: SALT's Commentary for Lent 2, SALT, February 19, 2024.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/20/cross-purposes-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-2>