

**Lent 2
February 28, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I believe that the reading we just heard from Mark's gospel is one of the most important pieces of Holy Scripture in our Bible. Contained within it is a lens by which to interpret the Jesus story ... and to see our own life of faith in a new and different way.

A couple of weeks ago, on the Last Sunday of Epiphany, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, we heard the story of the Transfiguration ... about Jesus on the mountain with Peter, James and John ... and Jesus was transfigured and seen by the disciples as standing with Moses and Elijah.

The story of the Transfiguration begins with the line, "Six days later" This raises a question for me: "What happened six days before the Transfiguration that was so important that it is used as a reference point?" Well, today's reading is about that event ... the event six days before the Transfiguration. In other words, the Transfiguration happened six days after the events in this reading. And the author of Mark's gospel felt that these events ... these words of Jesus that we heard this morning ... were so important that they become the reference point for the story that follows.

So, let's look at the story itself. In the reading Jesus seems to predict his suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter becomes very upset at this prediction and has an argument with Jesus, who then says that one must "lose one's life to save it." Then Jesus tells his disciples, along with the gathered crowd, to "take up their cross and follow me."

Once again, the few verses that lead into this story give it some context, and I think are essential to understanding the whole. This event takes place at Caesarea Philippi, at the headwaters of the Jordan River, at the base of the mountain upon which the Transfiguration happens. This is as far north as Jesus ever travels, and it is after his time in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus turned south and began his journey to Jerusalem ... his journey to the events of Holy Week and Good Friday.

In the few verses just before our reading this morning, Jesus asked his disciples "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples responded, "Some say that you are John the Baptist. Others say that you are Elijah. Even others say that you are another one of the prophets." Jesus then asked the disciples, "Who do YOU say that I am?" and it was

Peter who answered, "You are the messiah." It is obvious what Peter saw and expected of his friend Jesus.

I can certainly understand Peter's expectation ... his projection upon Jesus. Peter was a fisherman casting nets into the Sea of Galilee with his brother Andrew when Jesus came along. Being a fisherman may not have been the best of careers but it was a respectable job. People knew who Peter was and they depended upon him. Yet Jesus called Peter and Andrew and invited them to follow him on the way. One has to wonder what Peter saw in Jesus in that moment that he would leave his family, his home, his occupation to follow this itinerant preacher.

Peter then wandered with him around the Galilean countryside as Jesus taught and proclaimed God's Kingdom ... and healed the sick ... and brought sight to the blind ... and hearing to the deaf ... and even exorcised demons. Peter became close to Jesus and was one of those in his inner circle. Yes, I can certainly understand why Peter would answer Jesus' question by saying "You are the messiah." And, I would imagine that he answered it with a certain confidence that he got the answer right. Yet the response from Jesus is interesting:

And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

And immediately we pick up where today's reading begins:

*Then he [Jesus] 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, and after three days rise again.*

Instead of affirming Peter for his answer Jesus "sternly ordered" his disciples to keep what Peter said a secret. And then, instead of using the image of the Messiah, Jesus spoke of the Son of Man, and referred to a fate of suffering and death. This was not on Peter's list of expectations, and it caused a dispute between Peter and Jesus:

And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

I would imagine that Peter was somewhat dumbstruck. I would think that it left him confused and possibly rather upset. Jesus, who had called him away from his nets to follow him on the way had just scolded and reprimanded him ... and this Greek word that is here translated as "rebuked" is a very strong criticism. All Peter had said was that he thought Jesus was the Messiah, and that he didn't want to believe that Jesus was going to suffer and die. And while Peter is still reeling from this reproach, Jesus gathers others around him and began another teaching.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Peter had followed Jesus. He had dropped his nets. He had left his home. He had given up his family. He had trekked through the countryside with him. Now Peter listened as Jesus taught others what it really meant to be a "follower" on the way. Three things were necessary: deny self; take up one's cross; and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Peter wanted Jesus to be the Messiah ... but the Messiah as defined by Peter. However, it was an unfulfilled expectation, and it caused a rift in the relationship ... if even just for a moment. Yet, it wasn't just Peter's expectation, it was an expectation born in the Jewish identity. They lived with the yearly remembrance of the Passover when Moses led the people through the Red Sea. The picture for them was of jubilant Israelites dancing as the Egyptians drowned. God had led them to victory. Then God led them in a wilderness ... a difficult experience but they survived. And God led them to a new, rich land which they conquered. David, the boy shepherd, was anointed to become their king. The Hebrew word for "anointed" is "mashaich" from which comes "messiah." David's son Solomon built a glorious temple. This God had power and might for those who were faithful ... and God anointed messiahs.

Later, however, Israel lost ... as if God's power was gone ... or the faithfulness of the Jewish people had disappeared. Power always shifts. A theology grounded in political victory no longer worked for the Israelites. Faced with collapse and exile, the Israelites decided that God was punishing them. But when they tried to restore righteousness and were overrun yet again ... this time by the Romans ... and they had more theological footwork to do. What they longed for was a messiah ... a messiah to vanquish all their oppressors and restore the tribe of Israel to its former glory. Surely this is what God would provide. This was their expectation ... the God of power and might would return ... a messiah would rescue them.

This trajectory of the Hebrew Bible is what greeted Jesus. Would he be that messiah ... that hero, another Moses or David? Would he rain fire on his enemies? Would he establish a righteous army whom God would eventually make supreme? Would he fulfill this longing in the people? Would he fulfill the expectations of Peter?

What we know is that Jesus took another path. What Peter called the Messiah, Jesus called the Son of Man. Instead of triumph through military might, Jesus predicted suffering and death. And then he turned to face the curious crowd that had gathered around him. He taught them that to follow in his footsteps, to be on the way, his people must be servants, not masters. He taught them that hope comes through self-sacrifice, not national glory ... peace comes through love, not armed might ... God is on everyone's side, not just on the side of some holy tribe. He taught that we have to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

Today, we are that crowd that is gathered around Jesus. We are the ones hearing his words 2,000 years later as if they were coming from his mouth. We are to be bold and confident, but not brash and arrogant. We need to see God as our ally, but not see others who differ from us as our enemies. We need to strive, but not see defeat as God's punishment. We must understand that this journey of Lent that takes us to Good Friday, and then to Easter, is the way of Jesus ... and it is our way too.

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Three things are necessary: denial of self, taking up one's cross, and following in the footsteps of Jesus. None of them is easy. They lead to death, just as Jesus' life and ministry led to his death. But we also know the rest of the story. There is new life on the other side of that death. A new life given by God.

So, in this Lenten season what is it that you have to deny for the common good? What aspect of your being do you have to discard, leave behind, throw away? Is it an attitude ... an addiction ... a prejudice ... a pride ... a need to control ... an arrogance ... a co-dependence? Look in a mirror at who you are and ask yourself, "What do I need to stop being and doing so that something new can come alive?"

And taking up one's cross ... that brutal instrument of that death and denial. This isn't Jesus' cross that you are asked to pick up. He already carried his. This is your cross. This isn't about some public display of suffering for the sake of sympathy. It is the acceptance that whatever it is that has to die in us may be painful. This isn't about personal comfort ... it is about something greater than self. What we may have to die for will bring us loss, yet may also bring gain to the common good.

And then follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus was on the way ... the way of God's Kingdom ... the way of the Son of Man. It was a way of compassion and justice and forgiveness. It was the way of humility rather than might. It was the way of speaking truth to power. It was the way of peace.

Yes, Peter longed for a messiah. Peter expected Jesus to be the Messiah that he wanted him to be. But Jesus spoke as the Son of Man, and the Son of Man taught:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

"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."

One last thing ... without trying to be too political, I want to point out that this is not just some abstract theological concept ... it has played out over this past year right here in

our nation. Our country's population is less than five percent of the world's total population. Yet this week, we surpassed five hundred thousand death by COVID-19 ... twenty percent of the deaths worldwide!

Why? There are a number of reasons, but at least one of them is because of the differences over personal freedoms one the one hand, and the common good on the other. For many, wear masks and a prohibition about gather in groups was a restriction on their personal freedom. For many others, their self-interests were overridden by the advice of scientific and medical experts of what is the best practices for the common good of all in the nation. I wonder what the numbers would have looked like if more had chosen the common good over self-interests.

Jesus said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

Amen.

ADDENDUM

Another clue to the importance of this reading: This reading is in the exact middle of the gospel ... as if it is a fulcrum. In Mark's gospel, all the stories of Jesus' baptism, wilderness experience, teaching, and healing lead to this event. As if to make this crystal clear the author of Mark's gospel also uses an ancient literary device called a "chiasm" in this reading. It is called a "chiasm" after the Greek letter Chi which looks like an X when written.

"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."

Notice the position of the words "lose" and "save" ... in the first half of the phrase it is "save" then "lose." In the second half of the phrase it is "lose" then "save." That is a chiasmic phrase. The content of the phrase is also paradoxical. This literary device is placed in the exact center of Mark's gospel as a clue to understanding everything that has happened up to that point, and everything that is to follow. The placement of this story, written the way that it is, is no accident. As a paradox it offers no answers. However, it does call us to use it as a lens to ponder all that follows.

What if?

What if we were to read this story through a different lens? Remember that the author knows the whole story ... that Jesus suffered for speaking truth to power, and ultimately died for it. So the story is written ... and interpreted as a prediction of HIS suffering and death.

What if? What if this is about a Life Force that Jesus embodied ... but is also available to everyone. If that Life Force is concretized in one individual, such a Jesus, then others would not necessarily see it as something they could also access. So, when Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah he is concretizing that Life Force in Jesus, and Jesus refuses to let that happen. He "rebukes" Peter, and he tells his disciples not to tell anyone.

Then he begins teaching about the Son of Man. The Son of Man will go through great suffering, be rejected by the religious institution, be killed, and rise again. We know the end of the Jesus story, so we assume that Jesus is talking about himself when he references the "Son of Man."

But, what if? What if the term "Son of Man" is not a self-reference to Jesus? What if the "Son of Man" is not Jesus, but all humanity ... at least all humanity that has accessed this Life Force that is available in the Kingdom of God? What if Jesus is saying that accessing this Life Force will bring fullness of life AND ... at the same time ... lead to "great suffering" ... "rejection" by the establishments that set the boundaries of normal behaviors ... and be "killed." Maybe the death is literal ... maybe metaphorical ... maybe

existential. But this death does not kill the Life Force, and “three days” later ... or however long it takes to happen ... that Life Force is alive again.

What if? What if this Life Force which Peter tried to concretize in Jesus really is available to all of us? What if this Life Force is the “Christ” in Jesus Christ that the Church has taught for 2,000 years? (The word “Christ” comes from the Greek “christos” which is the translation of the Hebrew “mashiach” (messiah) which means “anointed one.”)

What if? What if? Many more questions, not enough time. Amen.