

Sermon, 2/25/2024, St. David's, Lent 2B, Mark 8:31-38 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

When people subscribe to the theology known as the prosperity gospel, or the idea that if you follow Jesus and pray you will get what you want and grow rich, today's Gospel is a great one to disabuse them of that heresy. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Definitely not a think-and-grow-rich kind of theology, is it?

Because we went back to the first chapter of Mark last Sunday, you may not know that immediately before today's passage, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter declared in response that Jesus was the Messiah. And then Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

So Peter had just confirmed for them all that Jesus was the Messiah, the one for whom they had all been waiting. They must have been thrilled to realize that this man, for whom they had given up everything, was The One.

And then he began to teach them that he must undergo great suffering and rejection and be executed.

Can you imagine the whiplash they must have felt? They had to have been so happy to have Jesus confirm to them who he really was, but then instead of telling them how he would free their people from Roman oppression, he said he was going to suffer and die. This was not a strategy to win followers.

Peter was the one brave enough to tell him this, and Peter took Jesus aside to do so. He didn't rebuke the Messiah in front of everyone. But come on, Jesus. Suffering, rejection and death is not a way to gain converts. We have to tell them what's in it for them. Following a guy who is going to get executed isn't going to cut it.

Peter took Jesus aside to rebuke him, but when Jesus rebukes him back, it's not in private. He calls Peter Satan in front of his disciples. Satan! Can you imagine?

"Satan" would not have evoked the same images for Peter and the disciples that the word does for us. Chances are we think of a red guy with horns and a pitchfork, but that's more from medieval imagery than the actual Bible. Or maybe I just think of Satan that way because I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona and the local college team was the sun devils. The word Satan means "tempter," and of course shows up in the Bible in the book of Job, and surely that is what Peter and the other disciples, all observant Jews, would have thought of. We also heard about "Satan" tempting Jesus in the wilderness last Sunday, although we were not given any other details in the Gospel of Mark account.

Jesus recognizes that Peter discouraging him from his call to suffer and die is a temptation, and he makes it very clear that he will not be tempted. Prosperity gospel proponents beware.

Lent is a time when we face our temptations, sometimes by fasting from something specific, like ice cream or meat. But as Christians, we face temptations in all seasons. What are yours? In our Lenten Wednesday evening program this week, we will discuss temptation in the wilderness.

Even if you missed the first night of the program, I hope you will consider attending. You can jump in at any time.

Jesus then goes even further in what he says. First, he talks about his own suffering and death. Then he calls Peter “Satan” when Peter tries to get him to turn away from that path. But then he says that anyone who wants to become his followers needs to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for his sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.

Who loves this message? Who would welcome hearing something like this?

My thinking about this passage has evolved over the years, especially since my own illnesses. I don’t think that Jesus is telling those who are gathered to see him that they are to seek out suffering, but rather that he is acknowledging the suffering that they are already experiencing or will experience. Peter and the other disciples, as we heard in their call stories last month, have already given up their lives to follow Jesus. They have lost their lives, and instead are following him around, sharing the good news.

And they have just learned that the man they are following around is the Messiah.

But also, following him around is going to cost them everything. They aren’t going to become fabulously wealthy because of the sacrifices they have made. But they will save their lives. It’s a tough message.

I know that you all have struggles in your lives. Sometimes I feel the weight of those struggles when I look out at you, and I know that when you see me up here, especially now that I can no longer stand up here without wobbling around, that you see how much I struggle as well. This is not a rich and fabulous church. But I find this place to be the most beautiful place on earth, because we imperfect Christians are gathered together, to worship and study a God who loves us enough to become like us and experience everything we experience, including the very worst. The pain. Rejection. Loneliness.

We don’t have to look very far to find a cross. During this season of Lent, we are invited to see that cross through the lens of Christ, who gave up everything for us.

When Peter cut Jesus off, taking him aside and rebuking him, I don’t think he was understanding the whole story. He was hearing about the suffering and rejection and execution. But Jesus also said, quite openly, that after three days he would rise again. The resurrection is what makes us Christians, the defining event of our faith. Life and love triumphing over death.

During Lent, we are invited into the wilderness. We are invited to face temptation. We are invited to reflect on our crosses. And we know that after Lent comes Easter. During this time in the wilderness, which means different things for all of us, we are doing our best to become the best Christians we can be on Easter.