

Lent 2B (2/25/2018)
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

We make the Messiah in our own image. But, Jesus frustrates our expectations of him, testifying instead to God's mysterious ways: love in suffering, life from death. And Jesus gives us crosses, and, through the death of our self-involvement, new life.

Once upon a time, a young seminarian graduated, packed up her life, and set out to begin her first call in a small town several states away. Shortly after her arrival, her new congregation held its annual church picnic. After worship on a glorious Sunday in late summer, the fledgling pastor made her way to the local park where everyone had gathered for hot dogs, casseroles, and camaraderie. Sweating in the afternoon heat, she pulled an icy bottle of beer from a cooler, cracked it open, and took a satisfying drink. Lowering the bottle from her lips, she noticed a distinguished member of the congregation eyeing her from a distance. The frown on the woman's face betrayed her disapproval as she approached the pastor and said, "You know, pastor, you shouldn't be drinking. It's not proper Christian behavior." Wide eyed, the pastor hesitated for a moment then blurted out first thought that popped into her head: "But, didn't Jesus turn water into wine at a wedding?" "Yes, he did," the parishioner responded with a sigh, "and that's the one thing I never liked about Jesus."

We can laugh at the rigid piety of the woman in the story, but we ought to admit that we also make Jesus in our own image. Who is Jesus to you? For some of us, he is the wise teacher; for others, the compassionate healer; for still others, the divine authority figure, or revolutionary martyr, or faithful friend. Whoever Jesus is to each of us, his identity tends to take the shape of what we find most agreeable or compelling in his

story. **Jesus becomes the kind of Messiah we want him to be, and we become convinced that our portrait of him captures the whole truth.**

This is why his prediction of his own rejection and death in our Gospel from Mark is so troubling to his first followers. Everything they've witnessed reveals Jesus' divine purpose, and no doubt they expect greatness from him.¹ So, when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter boldly confesses, "You are the Messiah." *You are God's anointed one, the one who will restore Israel, beleaguered by Roman subjugation, to its former independence and glory.* For Peter, Jesus' messianic identity implies religious and political ascendancy accompanied by the kind of coercive power that is capable of expelling Israel's foreign occupiers. Peter's expectations are more or less consistent with imagery, for instance, from Psalm 2:

[The LORD] said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."²

But, this violent depiction of God's anointed is not consistent with Jesus' self-understanding as Messiah, and he foresees an alternative outcome to his ministry: "...the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...." ***The Messiah will not conquer, he insists, but be conquered. And this the disciples simply cannot accept. That's not the Messiah they expected. It's unthinkable that God's chosen one would be crushed by the very powers they believed he would crush. Jesus' defeat and death would signify not only his failure, but also the failure of their hopes for the future.***

So, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. "You know, Lord," he might have said, "you shouldn't say things like that. It's not proper messianic behavior." It's hard to

¹ See Michael Rogness, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2316.

² See Jouette M. Bassler, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 71.

imagine the nerve it must have taken for Peter to presume to correct the Lord, but his willingness to do so speaks to the surprising and disconcerting nature of Jesus' prediction. **With only a few words, Jesus has undermined his followers' sense of certainty and security. God's way was supposed to transcend suffering, not submit to it.**

Yet, Jesus has no comfort to offer in light of the disciples' misunderstanding. "Get behind me, Satan!" he rebukes Peter, "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." *You are thinking not as God thinks, in other words, but as human beings do.*³ What's more, he continues, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This can't make the disciples feel any better. After all, it's not the most attractive invitation. *Leave everything behind and come fish for people* is a difficult enough call to follow, but *Come die with me?* It's no wonder the disciples fall silent. **As it turns out, discipleship involves more than riding Jesus' coattails to the good life.⁴ Jesus will lead them not into glory, but into sacrifice.**

In the end, the prospect of suffering and dying with Jesus proves too much, and the disciples scatter, leaving him to suffer and die alone. This isn't the Messiah the disciples expected; as one interpreter puts it, they "signed on for a crown, not a cross."⁵ **So, they refuse to accept the mysterious sacrifice at the heart of God's way in the world, and under the weight of their disappointed expectations, their faith finally collapses.**

The failure of the first disciples is not unlike our own. We, too, have well-formed ideas about who Jesus is, what he stands for, and what discipleship looks like. And, how

³ See Bassler, 71; NAB, NJB.

⁴ See Paul C. Shupe, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 70.

⁵ W. Hulitt Gloer, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 71.

often do those ideas take seriously the call to take up a cross? Does our posture toward our neighbors reflect Jesus' call to come die with him? What about our posture toward our enemies? Or, do we prefer the security of our established patterns? **Do we listen for Jesus to challenge and change us? Or, do we domesticate him in order to bend him to our preferences, or ignore him altogether when his message is uncomfortable?**

Like the first disciples, we err on the side of avoiding crosses. Taking up a cross, of course, involves sacrifice, and we are reluctant to let go of what we know and what we have. But, Jesus surprises us again with good news: "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Here is the heart of the mystery. **For as sure as he is that God's way involves sacrifice, Jesus is equally sure that this sacrifice means new life. Jesus' cross stands in solidarity with a suffering world. Nothing - no persecution, no violence, no loneliness - can deter the God of the cross from reaching out to the world, and even to the ones who crucify him, with love. And in this way, God establishes a pattern for our discipleship. Losing a life centered in our preconceptions, our preoccupations, our priorities, we discover the power of Christ-like love, that transformative love that looks to the interests of others.⁶ And in the end, this life is the most abundant kind.**

So, when you go today, dear church, go in the peace of the crucified Messiah. But, go in peace, and serve the Lord. Go in peace, and remember the poor. Go in peace, and take up your cross.

⁶ Philippians 2:4.