

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 ~ Mark 8:27-38
Again & Again, We are Called
 Second Sunday in Lent ~ February 28, 2021
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Introduction to Text:

Today we get to leap frog all the way from Mark 1 (this will not be another “Groundhog Day” text) to Mark 8:27, a hinge point in the whole gospel of Mark. Up to this point Jesus has been healing, teaching, performing miracles, and testing other religious authorities. But today, Jesus starts a new conversation with his disciples. Yes, this is the day when Jesus starts to teach them about his passion and the hard road that will lead to the cross. The real call and cost of discipleship. And they were not ready. Are we?

Sermon:

I am thrilled to report that I received my first dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine on Friday afternoon at Walgreen’s in Merrill! Woo hoo. Yes, I am still under 65 (not by much) but as a clergy person I qualify under the broader umbrella of health care providers. “Spiritual Advisor” is the box I checked. I’ll take it! And thank God for all the research, ingenuity, and hard work on the part of more people than we will ever know, that has created safe and effective vaccines at warp speed. And all who are working now to increase the pace and the flow of shots into arms, as we like to say.

Having my first vaccine feels like a shot in the arm in more ways than one. Like other vaccines before this, polio, for example, what had been a public health deadly danger loses its power to kill and diminish lives and our way of living the world over. Vaccines are an amazing invention that we may wish we could use for other problems and challenges in our lives. Wouldn’t it be great if there was a vaccine that stopped hate, or bullying, or on a larger scale, inoculated us against racism or poverty?

What we hear in our texts today is that we are called follow God onto a hard path of discipleship, not vaccinated against the illness and sin of the world. When Jesus began to teach his disciples about the passion—the kind of Messiah Jesus really was—Peter took Jesus aside and “rebuked him.” Exactly what he said, we will never know. I picture it something like this, “Wait, what? Jesus, that’s *not* how this has to go down! You’re the Messiah for God’s sake: you could do it any way you want. Why put yourself and us through all that? What are you thinking?!” Whatever he said, Peter managed to touch a central nerve (in the way that only those who know us best can do with just a look, or a tone of voice). We know this because Jesus’ rebuke was recorded, he turned and dressed down, Peter, calling him Satan, “Get behind me Satan.” The very disciple who had just distinguished himself from among the pack by giving the A+ answer, “You are the Messiah.” (8:29)

The way Mark narrates this exchange, after a year of Zoom meetings, I picture Peter’s rebuke of Jesus, as a “private chat” in a Zoom meeting. But Jesus takes this sidebar chat bubble and chooses to address his response to the whole group. He seizes the moment as a teaching

opportunity. Peter's failure to get it, became a spiritual opening for the group and beyond: Gallery View spanning across the continents and time zones: Jesus addressed everyone within earshot--and to us 2,000 years later: "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Mark wrote, "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (8:34) What was Jesus really talking about here? This is a hard teaching and has been badly misinterpreted by clergy and others in authority to perpetuate abusive relationships. I want to be clear: Jesus was not telling women (or men) who are victims of domestic violence that they must stay in an abusive relationship or marriage because it is "their cross to bear." This is not what Jesus meant.

Nor was he teaching the crowds that violence is a good and appropriate response to evil, sometimes called "redemptive violence." The lie of redemptive violence permeates nearly every part of our culture: from cartoons (think Popeye, Bugs Bunny) to celebrity twitter battles, to bullying, to how we teach US history, to how we interpret the cross. The cross does not justify violence. Quite the opposite, by dying on the cross Jesus breaks the cycles of violence and refuses to participate in the myth of redemptive violence.ⁱ Jesus was continuing in his father's footsteps set forth in the first rainbow covenant. God placed his cosmic bow in the sky way as a sign of promising to "never again" use violence as a path forward. Jesus' way, Jesus taking up his cross is the rainbow alternative to violence.

To understand what Jesus actually meant, we need to consider the context of his geographical location at the time, as well as what "Messiah" and the "cross" meant in Jesus' time and culture. Mark includes the detail that they were in Caesarea Philippi, standing in front of the Temple of Pan, a cult temple and center of religious power for the Roman Empire. His words were spoken in the shadow of this temple to the god of empire. "I am the Messiah, the Son of Man.... Not like those Messiahs at all." Actually, Jesus forged a new way of being Messiah, that was the opposite of those who worshipped Pan.

Peter had identified Christ, saying, "You are the Messiah." While we associate Messiahs as a spiritual name of our Savior, for everyone in the crowd that day, Messiah was a political title. Kings and emperors were anointed to their thrones and courts of absolute power. And *those* Messiahs of the Roman Empire regularly used crosses for very public crucifixions. Those accused of treason or sedition were killed on a cross and then their bodies were left to slowly decay for all to see.

Jesus is calling them and us to set our minds and hearts, and to plant our feet in Jesus' alternative empire where Christ is our Messiah, above all else. Now that we know a little more about the context, we can see that for Jesus, in that teaching moment, to "take up the cross" meant to take a political stand for justice. This truth gives the phrase "adulterous and sinful generation" primarily a social sin meaning. In the context of "take up your cross" Jesus was emphasizing social sins, fight for justice against social sins. For us, that would include

systemic racism, systemic poverty, climate change, voter suppression, inequities in health care and education. The very core of Jesus' parable in Matthew 25.

This is hard stuff, but here's the good news: We are called, not to be perfect. Not to expect to get it right the first time. We are called to hang in there and keep listening for Jesus' voice. About matters that are small and personal, as well as at the global and systemic level. Yes, we are called to stand against empire and any entrenched political system that contradicts Christ's kingdom of justice and mercy. This week we have had two heartening examples on the "social sin" level where we have gotten it wrong and are starting to get it right:

Progress on righting the sin of separating children from their parents at the southern border. We heard some good news about this "adulterous and sinful generation" sin our country has committed: The lawyers working to reunite immigrant parents and children reported that they have found the parents of 105 children in the past month. They still have yet to find the parents of 506 children. 322 of those children are believed to have been deported which will make the search more difficult. This is a turn toward light, healing, and redemption.

The second happened at NASA. The sin of systemic racism, in this case against African Americans for 500 years, took one small step toward justice this week. NASA's headquarter in Washington, D C., on Friday officially changed its name to Mary Jackson in honor of Mary Winston Jackson who successfully overcame the barriers of segregation and gender bias to become a professional aerospace engineer. A hero I honestly had never heard of until the movie, Hidden Figures. I pray that we continue to take up our cross of racial injustice for all People of Color and do what we can to dismantle it.

Whether we are trying to figure out when and how to reopen the church as the pandemic's hold lets up; or we are trying to figure out a problem in a relationship. Or if we are trying to figure out how to really take up our cross and work for justice in our community and beyond, here's the thing. Our call is to keep listening for Jesus' voice. Especially when we stumble. As Richard Rohr has written, "We come to God not by doing it right but by doing it wrong." I find comfort in that truth. We learn almost nothing, spiritually, from success. Our greatest teachers are our failures.

For most of us, our first impulse is to choose the easy road, or to take the situation into our own hands because we think we know better. Abraham and Sarah and also Peter, three of our biblical heroes all did this. But they didn't stop when they failed. Nor did God give up on them. God made good on God's rainbow promise again and again and again.

By Genesis 17, where our first lesson picked up, both Abram and Sarai had pulled various stunts, trying to manipulate and control, "help God" along. Both had been played and were players with each other as well as others under their power. Peter, too, right in this passage, and throughout is life famously missed the mark again and again. And still, God called them to essential, life-changing work for the good of God's kingdom. Their stories, their journeys of faith encourage me and I hope they encourage you too. They tell me that God knows, even when we

are trying our best, we can totally mess up. Our call is to hang in there, God is in all and wants us to be too. Keep staying in there, listening for Jesus voice, Jesus' call above and sometimes in the midst of all the other competing voices.

Need a midweek shot of inspiration and blessed fellowship on this theme? Come reset your mind on divine things, with us at our Lenten Desserts on Zoom. We are exploring this theme of how God calls us, in the midst of our brokenness and weirdness, every Wednesday throughout Lent at 7:00 p.m. will look at a quick portrait of a Bible character and talk about him or her and what they teach us. It's fun, low key, and short: only 45 minutes. This Wednesday it's Martha. Join us. It will be a chance to consider again and again how God is with us, calls us. Good stuff!

If only we did have a vaccine against sin and separation from God's way of Love and Grace. Wouldn't the world be a better place? The truth is we do. Right here. (Point at cross) and here (point at heart). If only we listen and listen for Jesus' call, take up our cross, and follow him. Step by misstep by step.

ⁱ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent2b/#Mark8%3A31-38>