

Believing Jesus

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning God wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult

and spitting. The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; the one who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “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.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

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.

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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of God with the holy angels.”

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Believing Jesus

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman—the woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter and gets called a dog for her trouble; the woman who takes Jesus’ insult and turns it into a teaching moment, expanding Jesus’ understanding of who is included in God’s kingdom. It’s a challenging story for many of us because it paints a picture of Jesus as rude and dismissive, and in doing so, it challenges us to see Jesus as more than the picture-perfect Sunday School Jesus so many of us grew up with.

If last week’s reading presented a Jesus many of us struggle to see clearly, this week’s story presents a Jesus whom Peter struggles to see clearly. Between these two stories lies one of my favorite passages—an encounter between Jesus and a blind man in which Jesus tries to heal the man’s sight by spitting on his hands and placing them on the man’s eyes. Only ... it doesn’t work. Or, at least, it doesn’t work completely, because when the man opens his eyes, he reports that he sees people, but they look like trees walking. And so Jesus must lay hands on him a second time before his vision is restored. Even with Jesus’ help, it can be hard to see things clearly.

As they walk away from this encounter, Jesus begins a conversation with his disciples—who do people say that I am? How clearly, in other words, are people seeing me? The disciples respond with answers like Elijah and John the Baptist—evidence that people are seeing aspects of who Jesus is, but perhaps not the whole of who he is—and so Jesus ask the question more directly: who do you say that I am?

Surprisingly, it is Peter who answers the question. Peter, you might recall, is the disciple who so often stumbles and fails to understand what Jesus is about—it was Peter who floundered and fell when Jesus invited him to step out of the boat on faith; Peter who failed to understand the transfiguration and instead wanted to build dwelling places; and Peter who, in the end, denied Jesus three times despite being warned in advance that he would do exactly that. Yet, in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus declares Peter to be the rock upon which will be built. And, in this instance, Peter gets it right: “you are the messiah,” he proclaims.

And Jesus, as if in affirmation of Peter’s response, begins to teach the disciples and the crowd what it means to be the Messiah. Specifically, he begins to teach that Messiah must undergo great suffering, be rejected, and be killed. You can almost imagine Peter’s brain short-circuiting, his elation at getting the answer right quickly deflating because that is not what

Peter was taught about the Messiah. A Messiah who suffers and dies is not why Peter followed Jesus.

Peter, like almost all Jews of his time, would have been taught that one day a Messiah would come who would restore Israel's fortunes. This Messiah would come and take his rightful place as Israel's king—vanquishing any foes and restoring Israel to its rightful place as the light of the world. So it's not surprising that Peter quietly pulls Jesus aside and tells him, with all due deference, that his message is a little off-brand, that talk of suffering isn't going to win any converts to their cause, that Jesus should really focus instead on the glory parts, on how things were going to get better, how Jesus was going to make things better.

Of course, those of us sitting in the 21st century know that Peter isn't seeing Jesus, not fully, he's seeing his own conception of the Messiah, he's seeing a tree walking, but not Jesus. And so we are not surprised when Jesus rebukes him—telling him in no uncertain terms that the Messiah is going to be defined not by human ambitions but by divine intentions.

When Jesus then turns to the crowds and begins teaching that you have to lose your life to save it, that to follow him one must pick up their own cross, those of us in the 21st century nod our heads and tune out, because we already know that Jesus will have to die; we don't need to listen to Jesus correct the misperceptions of his contemporaries, we already know that Jesus will suffer and die at the hands of those who reject him.

It helps, of course, that we live in a time and place where we don't need a political messiah to save us from foreign rule or persecution; we don't need someone to come and restore our fortunes because we, as a country, have not lost them.

But there's something appropriate about the fact that it is Peter who Jesus calls the rock upon whom the church will be found—that it is Peter who represents the future church in the gospel narratives—because, despite vastly different circumstances, we're not so different from Peter. We will gladly, and proudly, proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, but we are not particularly interested in the lesson that follows. We might not want the same kind of messiah that Peter wanted, but we, too, have our own ideas about who the messiah should be—and it isn't someone who so upsets the status quo that they get themselves killed. And it certainly shouldn't be someone who asks us to do the same.

And so we try to soften the blow—we say that we have to be willing to lose our lives, should the need arise ... and then we count our lucky stars that that need never seems to arise. We take up our crosses, but only when we define them as difficult relatives or an exhausting phase of life.

So long as we parse the sentence correctly, define the terms appropriately, or distance ourselves historically, we can hear this morning's passage and keep living our lives.

Unfortunately, we're not meant to hear this morning's passage and keep living our lives. We're meant to hear this morning's passage and take a good long look at our lives—Jesus

doesn't tell us we have to lose our life in order to gain our life because God wants us to suffer, Jesus tells us that we have to lose our lives to save our lives because we live in a world that is always going to be at best apathetic and at worst hostile to the good news that Jesus came to proclaim. Jesus' teachings are meant to serve not as a prescription for how to live but as a guidepost. They aren't tasks we can check off a to-do list, they are an indication of whether or not we are following Jesus.

We all want to avoid the cross. However much we display them or wear them, none of us want to spend time around the cross anymore than we would want to spend time around the electric chair—we don't want to be reminded of what humankind, of what we, are capable of; and we certainly don't want to dwell on the possibility that such a sacrifice might one day be required of us or of those we love.

It's not for nothing that theologians have spent centuries trying to explain, make sense of, or justify the cross; it's not for nothing that come Holy Week, most of us will skip from Palm Sunday to Easter, preferring not to have to confront a crucified savior, the part of our own humanity that put him there, or the God in heaven who allowed it to happen. We much prefer the resurrection—the triumphal joy, the victorious defeat. If we could just focus enough on Easter, maybe we could pretend that taking up our own cross isn't necessary, that sacrificing our own lives won't be required.

But we still live in a world that is, at best, apathetic to the Good News that Christ came to proclaim; and Christ's teachings still apply—even to us. We might live in a so-called Christian nation where we are no longer persecuted because we proclaim Jesus is the Messiah, but we still live in a country that kills innocent people, that kills people period. We still live in a country where people value their own individual freedom over the common good, where the return to business is prioritized above communal safety. We still live in a country where people full-time jobs that fail to give them healthcare or pay them enough to live on, where a global pandemic forced far too many people to have to choose between the safety and well-being of themselves and their family and earning enough money to put food on the table. We still live in a country where the color of your skin determines how safe you feel and how well you will be treated. And if your skin happens to be the color of Jesus' skin, well ...

Jesus didn't go to the cross because it was God's divine plan. The Messiah didn't have to suffer and die in order to satisfy some divine bloodlust or balance sheet—the Messiah had to suffer and die because he lived in a way that the world could not abide, because he came and preached that God's love extends to all people, equally; because he healed the crazy, included the outcast, and loved his enemies even as he called them out by name and taught against them.

We don't have to suffer or take up the cross or give up our lives to earn God's love, we already have that. But if we want to follow Jesus, we're going to have to live lives that disrupt that world around us, that call for different values, that embody different beliefs. And if the lives we're living don't require us to give up what we hold most dear, if they don't cost us

something, be it our reputation, our relationships, or our comfort, than we might need to ask ourselves if we're really following Jesus or if we're just trailing after trees walking.

Seeing Jesus is the first step, believing him, even when his words are hard, is the next.

Amen.