

Take Up Your Cross

Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? It's a question that a lot of people must have been asking in Galilee and Judaea 2000 years ago. Sometimes reported, sometimes left for us to hear between the lines, it's a question that hangs over the accounts of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel According to Mark. At the outset of the book, John the Baptizer draws huge crowds to hear his message of repentance and to accept baptism, yet he says, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me..." His listeners must have said among themselves, "Who is he? Where is the one John is talking about?" When Jesus did appear to be baptized by John, the heavens were rent open and the Spirit of God came down upon him. Surely, observers must have whispered, "Who is this, to be marked by God in such a way?" Jesus went to Capernaum and taught in the synagogue with an unearthly authority and healed a possessed man. Mark records, "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'" Who is this guy? Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? Why don't his disciples fast? Why does he break the Sabbath? Is he insane? Is he the Devil? "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands? Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?" Is he a ghost that walks on the water? Who is this guy?

At approximately the mid-point of his book, Mark, possibly drawing on the reminiscences of Peter, recalls the pivotal time that Jesus reversed the question and put it to his disciples. "Who do people say that I am?" They began to report back to him what they had heard. "Some say you are John the Baptist, come back from the dead." That would have been an easy rumor for many people to believe. The message the two men preached was similar. They both came from Galilee. Jesus hadn't been in public ministry long before John had been arrested and killed, so for many they hadn't overlapped at all. Being cousins, they may have even looked alike! "Some people say you are Elijah." Since at least the time of the prophet Malachi, the Jews had looked for Elijah to return from heaven where God had taken him in a fiery chariot to announce the coming Messiah and the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. The very end of the book of Malachi says, "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts... Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse." To this day, Jews celebrating the Passover pour an extra cup of wine for Elijah and open the door to the room where the feast is held so that the prophet may enter upon his return. The disciples have another answer for Jesus, as well, one that some scholars translate this way: "Some say you are the *other* prophet." It is a reference to Deuteronomy 18:15, when Moses tells the Children of Israel, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." People were beginning to hope that Jesus would be a prophet as great as Moses the Lawgiver.

But what Jesus really wants to know is who they, the disciples, think he is. Peter, who often seems to speak for his fellows, right or wrong, answers up: "You are the Messiah." Matthew,

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whose Gospel is written at a less breakneck pace than Mark's, records a slightly longer answer and response: "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'" All three Synoptic Gospels agree that Jesus then "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

Well, question answered then. Who is Jesus? He's the Messiah. Peter said so and Jesus tacitly agreed with him, praising him for his God-given insight, according to Matthew. But what does that mean? What did Peter mean when he called Jesus the Messiah or, to give its Greek equivalent, the Christ? Did he mean the same thing that Jesus meant when he accepted the title from Peter or did they have different things in mind? We can come to some pretty safe conclusions about what Peter meant. The Jews, remember, were a conquered people living in an occupied land. They had not controlled their own political destiny, save for 100 years under the Maccabees, since the Babylonian conquest in 586 BCE, more than 600 years before. They were hungry for political freedom, for a military hero who would rescue them from the Romans and rule them in justice like David and Solomon. The Rev. Dr. Debra Samuelson of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta summarizes the hopes of the Jews as voiced by Peter this way: "Peter was looking for a savior who was stronger than anything -- who would never be defeated -- who would take care of all the threats and who would overpower all opposition -- someone who would rescue him and the nation of Israel from the mess they were in. To put it in modern terms -- Peter was looking for a bailout."

But Jesus understands the identity and role of the Messiah quite differently. This past Wednesday night at "Soup, Salad & Soul," we began our study of Rev. Ernest Flores' book, [Tempted to Leave the Cross](#) with his chapter on Jesus and Isaiah 53. In that chapter, Isaiah relates his vision of God's Suffering Servant, the one who will come and take the consequences of all human sin upon himself in order to free humankind from the final penalty of that sin. "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," says Isaiah. "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed... the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." "In this ancient manuscript," writes Flores, "in this prophetic voice, in this prose and poetry, I've just seen Jesus." And, from what we read in the Gospels, it's clear that Jesus sees himself in this passage of Isaiah as well. "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."

Peter reacts much like a good political aide must when the candidate gets "off message." He takes Jesus aside, so as not to embarrass him, and "rebukes" him or "commands him sternly" – the verb is the same as in verse 30, when Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. I can just imagine the conversation, can't you? "Jesus Christ, you can't go around telling people you're going to be rejected and killed! My God, what kind of talk is that? You'll never get the movement off the ground with that kind of defeatist stuff!" But Jesus puts Peter

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back in his place. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Poor Peter. There’s no doubt that he means well, but he’s let the Master’s praise just a few minutes earlier go to his head. He’s fallen prey, as so many of us do, to arrogance, to the sin of thinking that he can arrange things in life just as well as God can; better, even. But Jesus quickly points out to him that to assume the role of God by stating that we, not God, know best, putting our desires ahead of God’s, is the mark of Satan in our lives, the first evil that leads to all others. It’s not a hard trap to fall into. In fact, the more we strive to live lives pleasing to God, the easier it may be to begin to blur the lines between our wills and God’s own. My friend Jeannette Clift George is a Bible teacher and motivational speaker who is constantly in demand by church groups as well as being a playwright and actress. She often confesses this sin in herself publicly. “If only God would listen to me,” she says in mock seriousness, “I could tell Him how to run things perfectly.” Then she laughs ruefully at herself, inviting her audience to laugh along, understanding full well just how familiar a sin this is to all in her hearing. I always laughed – I knew she was speaking for me as well.

“Jesus 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.” Rather than emulating Satan as Peter did, those of us who want to follow Jesus must reject our own self-centered desires and take up our cross. We cannot stand with the forces of self-aggrandizement and with Jesus. We cannot follow selfishness and claim to follow Jesus. We cannot walk in the way that the world says leads to power and still walk in the way of the Cross. The call of Jesus that day and the call that still echoes in our ears is to consider the greater good, to join God in loving all humankind, to put the needs of others ahead of our own wants. That is what it is to deny ourselves.

But what of taking up the cross? Could Jesus have seriously meant for all of his disciples, all of us, to prepare themselves for the most terrible and painful death known to his culture? Rev. Kristin Ofstad reminds us in her commentary on this passage that Jesus had “a deep and abiding horror” of the Cross. “That is why he pleads with his Father as a child in Gethsemane for another Way (14:34-36), and dies screaming in bewildered despair to the God he believed had abandoned him (15:34).” Likewise, Sarah Dylan Breuer, in her blog entry on this passage, writes that Jesus’ words are “not a call to martyrdom -- if nothing else, the teaching that Jesus’ blood, shed on the Cross, was a perfect, full, and sufficient sacrifice for sin ought to tell us that Jesus’ blood was the LAST blood to be shed because of sin. God does not need or want bloodshed.” We are not called to take up the Cross of Jesus but take up our own crosses – each of us has our own calling, our own place in the Body of Christ. Incidentally, when we sing “Where He Leads Me” in a few minutes, the Chalice Hymnal has printed the words wrong. I’ve double-checked online and in every hymnal I could find. Just as with Jesus’ words in the Gospel, the words of the song should be “take *thy* cross” not “take *my* cross.”

But there is something to be learned from Jesus’ experience of the Cross that applies, a way in which the pain of the Cross may, indeed *should* become real for us. It separates us unequivocally from that in the world that is not aligned with God. Brian Stoffregen writes, “The act of carrying the cross was a public display of guilt which resulted in ridicule and scorn from

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the people. With this understanding, the phrase might be paraphrased: ‘be willing to publicly display your faith and suffer the consequences that such a display might evoke.’” If we are to truly be followers of Jesus, then we must be willing to act as his disciples no matter what the situation, no matter who is watching, every minute of every day of the week. We cannot be ashamed of the Son of Man and his words. We cannot be what Ernest Flores refers to as *domingueros*, “Sunday-Only Christians.” As the old saying goes, sitting in church for an hour once a week doesn’t make you a Christian any more than sitting in a garage for an hour makes you a car.

To take up one’s cross means to invest our lives completely in the will of God, to so set our sights on what God would have us do that we lose the old, self-centered parts of our lives and in so doing save the true core of our lives, that which was created to be in loving relationship with God. Taking up our crosses means to face our limitations without the power of God in our lives, to realize that without God we are as fixed to the way of death by sin as Jesus was fixed to his cross by nails. To take up our crosses means that we must finally confess that we are not in control and that we will continue to be controlled by the forces that oppose creation until we open our lives and accept the love of the Creator.

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The world around us offers us plenty of heroes, plenty of gods, who are muscular and successful; who win everything the world says is important. Why not follow them? Why follow one who was crucified? Perhaps because as the world’s economy has collapsed we have seen through the glitter of the world to the hollowness and darkness at its core, a world where long-time employees are discarded without a thought, where children are left without health insurance or adequate food, where programs helping the poor go unfunded while captains of industry take their bonuses from the tax dollars provided to prop up their tottering empires. Perhaps because as we see the suffering around us increase we can realize the truth of the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said “Only the suffering God can help.” Perhaps now we are ready for the one whom Alfred Whitehead called “the fellow sufferer who understands.” When we follow Jesus’ call to take up our cross, we join our Loving Creator who stands in solidarity with the poor, who hears the cry of widows and orphans and calls on God’s people to rescue them. Kenneth Carder writes, “The God of the Bible suffers with the people. God comes among us as a vulnerable baby born among the homeless, lives as an immigrant, associates with the outcasts and compares the kingdom to receiving a little child. God is then executed as a criminal and buried in a borrowed tomb.”

And yet, Carder writes, “We follow the crucified Christ as people of hope. We live on the other side of the cross from Peter. What Jesus hinted to Peter at Caesarea Philippi happened. The Crucified One became the Risen One. Those who follow him know the future does not belong to the triumph of suffering, sin and death. It belongs to the reign of Christ all over creation. We have no reason, therefore, to be ashamed of him or hesitant to follow him. The One who calls us to take up our cross goes with us to the cross. . . and beyond.”

One of the great Christian writers of the 20th Century, a favorite of mine since childhood, summarizes our Gospel passage this way: “The principle runs through all life, from top to bottom,” C.S. Lewis writes in Mere Christianity. “Give up yourself and you will find your real

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self. Lose life and it will be saved. Submit to death - the death of ambitions and secret wishes. Keep nothing back. Nothing in us that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for Christ and you will find him, and with him, everything else thrown in.”

Many of you will be familiar with what is known as “the Serenity Prayer.” It is usually attributed to that great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a native, like me, of Missouri. I’d often heard the first part of it but read its continuation only this week. It seems to me to capture perfectly the idea of following Jesus, of taking up one’s cross and of saving one’s life by losing it. It is a reminder of God’s love and of the hope of the Resurrection in which we find that serenity that allows us to face all trials. Hear it as a statement of the Good News this morning; a statement that calls us to offer ourselves to God in service of all people, those whom God loves so abundantly:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
the courage to change the things I can;
and the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.
Amen.