

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Mark 8:27-38

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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.' *Mark 8:31-33*

Our text for the Second Sunday in Lent is a hinge perfectly centered in Mark's Gospel. Before this event runs the flow of Jesus ministry. After his shocking announcement to the disciples that he is to go to Jerusalem to be executed by the powers—an announcement he will make three times ultimately, signifying certainty—Jesus sets his face like a flint toward his cross. Along the way this little group of threadbare holy man and half-numb, captivated followers, must have passed many a corpse, withered and blackened in the sun, hanging from its cross-like scaffold. The Romans left them by public roads as a warning and a threat.

All through the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus heals the sick or drives out some pathogen of mind ("demons" as the ancients, for want of a cause, called them), he tells those who witness the healing to tell no one. But of course, they do. So by the middle of the Gospel the reader, like the disciples after the calming of the storm, is asking, "Who then *is* this, that even the wind and the sea obey him." Everyone is wondering. So Jesus asks them, "Who are people saying that I am?" They hazard a range of guesses like a stumped "Jeopardy" panel: John the Baptist? (who had been beheaded by Herod); Elijah returned after 800 years?; others?; one of the prophets? Then Jesus asks them, "But who do *you* say that I am." And one senses Peter, with tremulous faith, for no one had yet voiced such hope, say: "You are the Christ," (the chosen one of God). "And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him." (I encourage you to read this shortest of gospels to try to find out why?)

Immediately, Jesus tells them that he is to be executed in Jerusalem. And Peter, flushed with zeal to defend God's chosen one, rebukes Jesus. But Jesus turns on him like a drill sergeant. "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

From that moment Jesus' focus on the cross is resolute and absolute. And in the same breath he calls all the crowd and disciples—and so us—to hear him. He tells of his fate, and he makes that same death our one true calling. Not in the sense that we must die by crucifixion in order to follow him faithfully, but we must all surrender our greatest gift, our most potent human capacity to God, as he does. We must make our will subservient to his, must choose one master, and it cannot be ourselves. This is what it means to call Jesus "Lord." It means we have pledged to be centered on him. Not satellite centered. Not traveling through an elliptical orbit that vacillates between two foci, God and self-determination. But one center. This is the pilgrimage of Lent. A journey to get back on track to the center.

You may never have heard of Simone Weil. A young Jewish woman from a well to do

family in the 1930's, she abandoned her teaching job in her native France so that she could work among the poor, first as an unskilled laborer then as a machine operator in a Renault plant. Over the objections of her family she lived a life no different from her fellow workers. Not a strong person, she grew ill. When Hitler occupied France in 1940, she worked in the resistance movement, finally emigrating to England where she joined the French resistance in exile. As a Jew, she could not officially join the struggle for France, so she took part in it by voluntarily limiting herself to the same rations as her exiled countrymen. Though safe in England, and an educated woman of means, she refused to make use of her privilege. In the spring of 1943, sick and malnourished, she entered the hospital where she died the following August at the age of 34.

"Why did she do it?" asks Barbara Brown Taylor. "Because she had encountered Christ and she believed him. Though never baptized, thinking that would make her an insider instead of an outsider like him, she believed it was possible to take on suffering for the sake of others, and she bet her life on it." You can read her conclusions in any number of her very influential books.

We might ask, what was the point if nothing was achieved. We might say that if she had cared for her health, she could have lived a long life to a greater good. We could say the same about Jesus, who died about the same age. But then, all such musings come down to assessing life as a utility to be used as economically as possible. But she chose a path of solidarity with the poor, as Jesus principally did, for they were, and still are the majority of the earth. Her chief discovery was that Christian faith has nothing to do with the removal of suffering. "It offers no supernatural remedy for suffering," she wrote.

"What it offers, instead is a supernatural use for it." Weil writes, "When

the soul in travail is able to go on loving God, not because life is good but simply because God is, if it does not renounce loving, it happens one day to hear, not a reply to the question which it cries, for there is none, but the very silence as something infinitely more full of significance than any response, like God himself speaking. It knows then that God's absence here below is the same thing as the secret presence upon earth of the God who is in heaven."

The answers we seek are *in the journey*, a journey that few are willing to take. It does not come in asking for quick answers or explanations. So the preacher's task becomes a perilous one. Congregations asks, "Tell us what it all means." "Show us by what technique we can gain fulfillment." "Where are the stepping stones to the good life?" All the while Jesus says, as he did to the disciples, "Follow me. Come and see. Take up your cross and follow me." And along the way he teaches us in parables that we struggle to unpack.

Peter Gomes writes that the cross,

. . . central to the Christian enterprise and . . . upon which Jesus was executed, has been so long undermined by a false gospel of Christian triumph and success that it is almost impossible to recover [it] for the edification of the church. Protestants have long beguiled themselves with the notion that they worship a victorious and risen Christ, and thus an empty cross. . . . so the Protestant churches are filled on Easter but empty on Good Friday [and Maundy Thursday]. The faith that is formed out of such a travesty of the gospel is one that is unfamiliar with suffering . . . and unable to recognize the work of God in it. Those who worship at the church of the costless cross literally "have their reward," as

Jesus says.

Jesus submitted to the worst of human rejection and cruelty to show that the power of God through him could not be annihilated. And this same self-denial, this abdication from the throne of self-determination, he asks of us in the conduct of our lives. If we cling to self-determination, neglecting to pour the fullness of our lives into God, into what vessel can God pour our eternal life. If we do empty ourselves, he said, we will find the hidden kingdom that our souls are so restless for. I would not tell you this if I had not personally found it to be true. In asking us to take up our cross and follow him, he was asking us, as he did, to be centered in God in all things, even as he was centered on his cross, even as he was centered from his solitude with God in the early morning to his being impaled at the last between two criminals. He asks us to be forgiving, which breeds in us a forgiving nature. He asks us, in the face of hostility in the office or the conference room, or the school yard, to pray silently when confrontation boils, and to watch the change come over someone like a veil lifted—as with the centurion before the cross. He asks us to encircle the day with a ring of prayer and so live it in prayerful expectation. If we dismiss these thoughts as impractical or irrelevant to our times, ask yourself, on what else more compelling and sure thing would you center yourself?

Pete Velander writes:

I remember the day I learned to hate racism. I was five years old.

The walk home from school was only about five blocks. I usually walked with some friends. On this day I walked alone. Happy, but in a hurry, I decided to take a shortcut through the alley. Without a care in the world I careened around the corner. Then I looked up-too late to change course. I had walked in on a back-alley beating.

There were three big white kids. In retrospect they were probably no more than sixth graders, but they looked like giants from my kindergarten perspective. There was one black kid. He was standing against a garage, his hands behind his back. The three white kids were taking turns punching him. They laughed. He stood silently except for the involuntary groans that followed each blow.

And now I was caught. One of the three grabbed and stood me in front of their victim. “You take a turn,” he said. “Hit the nigger!” I stood paralyzed. “Hit him or you’re next!” So I did. I feigned a punch. I can still feel the fuzz of that boy’s turquoise sweater as my knuckles gently touched his stomach. I don’t know how many punches there were. I don’t know how long he had to stand backed up against that garage. After my minute participation in the conspiracy they let me go and I ran. I ran home crying and sick to my stomach. I have never forgotten.

Thirty-five years later that event still preaches a sermon to me every time I remember it. One can despise, decry, denounce, and deplore something without ever being willing to suffer, or even be inconvenienced, to bring about change. If there is one thing that Jesus taught us it was how to suffer with and for others.

Jesus walked the way of the cross. He taught us the meaning of suffering as a servant. Perhaps my first chance to follow that example came in the alley by a garage thirty-five years ago.

I don’t know if that black boy from the alley grew up, or where he lives, or what he does today. I never knew his name. I wish I did. I wish I could find him. I need to ask his forgiveness—not for the blow I delivered, for it was nothing, but for the blows I refused to stand by his side and receive. I think that’s what it takes.

Amen.