

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

February 25, 2024 – SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: “*Our Cross: Dying to Self, Obedience to God*”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (God makes a covenant with Abraham)  
Psalm 22:22-30 (Praise the Lord for caring for the poor)  
Romans 4:13-25 (We are saved by faith in Christ, not the law)  
St. Mark 8:31-38 (Jesus teaches: Deny yourself and take up your cross)

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Imagine the scene. You are one of the group of Galileans who have been singled out to follow the most compelling teacher ever to walk the stony hills of Israel. You’ve been with your beloved leader, the one you call Master and Rabbi, for nearly three years now, and increasingly, you watch as more people come to hear Him, entranced by His message about God as a loving Father, people longing to be fed who desperately need His words of comfort. And then there are those miserable ones who are sick or blind, who take up His time, but He gives of it freely, healing them and giving them sight in the process. But you, you are not one of the crowd. You are the one who just recently had his name changed from Simon to Peter. You are Petros, the rock, the stone chosen, cut, and named by your beloved Rabbi. You declared the conviction of your heart when He asked that stirring question: “Who do you say that I am?” And you, Simon the fisherman, you were the one with the right answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:15b,16b).

So, now that we have imagined the context and somehow identified with Peter at his triumphant moment of revelation and stunning declaration, let us move with him to the scene that follows. Already, halfway into St. Mark’s Gospel, we are entering the second part that concentrates on Jesus’ Passion—a Biblical word that means “suffering,” not romantic ardor. In today’s reading, we hear Jesus’ first prediction of His suffering and death according to Mark’s unique style of brevity and immediacy: “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 . . .”

“*What?! Did he say killed?*” The disciples’ preoccupations fly out the window; they look at each other stunned; fail to hear the end of the prediction; and then turn to Peter because Jesus seems removed, deep in thought—probably in prayer, they suppose, for He always seems to be connected to Someone else. And as usual, Peter takes charge. This cannot be! No one had *ever* spoken of the Messiah as having to suffer. (I guess Peter hadn’t read the four “Suffering Servant” prophetic passages in Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; and 52:13–53:12.) After all, the word Messiah, “the Anointed One of God,” is a *triumphant* word.

He grasps Jesus by the arm to move Him a bit away from the others and Jesus allows this, listening to him as Peter rebukes Him. What does the word ‘rebuke’ mean? According to a modern thesaurus, its synonyms include: “reproach, censure, reprimand, scold, tell-off, reprove, admonish, chide, and rake over the coals.” Yikes! Imagine doing that to *Jesus*! But Peter is bold and impulsive, so he probably said something like, “How can you speak of suffering and death? Didn’t we agree just the other day that You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God? And You did not dispute it when I declared it to You. Why are You scaring us like this?”

In his characteristic style, Mark doesn’t provide Peter’s words. He moves straight to *Jesus* rebuking *Peter*. But maybe not immediately (another of Mark’s favorite adverbs). Jesus pulls away from Peter, to turn and look at His disciples, the people He has loved and taught for three years; the ones on whom He has pinned His hopes that the vision of God’s Kingdom which has set *Him* on fire will do the same for them, such that they will continue His mission. Jesus sees they are stunned and frightened, but mostly confused. He knows He has the power to change His own course and to comfort them. But He remembers His forty days in the wilderness when Satan tempted Him with an alternative destiny: “All these kingdoms will be yours if you follow me. Just say the word. Forget the One who is pulling you to Himself, forget your Father in Heaven.”

Jesus then addresses Peter just as harshly as Peter had addressed Him, but His eyes are on all the disciples, for each one of them matters greatly. If they don’t understand, no one will. “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus cries out again—as He did in the wilderness—directly to Peter.

Then Jesus explains: “You’re thinking of this in human terms. You’re envisioning human power and armies and wealth, and even violence. But the ways of God are different. Haven’t I shown you this, in my teaching about God’s Kingdom?”

He sees Peter’s anger and confusion followed rapidly by his great sadness. And Jesus knows that His dear disciple must endure much agony of spirit and grief before he truly understands. Now Jesus must teach them all over again. It is urgent that they understand the true values of God’s Kingdom. But His first words are terrible. You want to follow Me? It will be hard. I can’t promise you power or wealth or status. First, you must recognize that God—not you, yourself—is the center and purpose of your existence. “Take up your cross,” He says, “and follow Me.”

In our time this expression is used so casually—“I have such a cross to bear,” someone will complain about an everyday annoyance or a temporary burden. But in Jesus’ day, His listeners knew what those words meant in all their gruesomeness. Under the brutality of Roman rule, the condemned had to carry their own instrument of a horrific death to their crucifixion—where they would die a slow, agonizing and inhumane death. Therefore, this was a dreadful saying to the ears that first heard it. They were all too familiar with Roman cruelty.

Later they would come to understand more fully Jesus’ teaching: “If you can recognize your own self-centeredness and then discard it, you can follow Me. If you understand that the life I call you to may cause your own death—or the death of things and ways you previously valued—you can follow me.” They were trying to comprehend what we are invited to learn in our time, as well—that the life we are called to live as Christ-followers is filled with paradox: We gain by losing. Only dying to self leads to life abundant. And death leads to life eternal. The first become last. The last—the despised, the unwanted, the overlooked—become first. This is not a happiness gospel, nor a prosperity gospel. We are not called to make millions while others go hungry. We are not called to live in comfortable mansions when others have nowhere to lay their heads. We are not called to be ignorantly cheerful in a world filled with suffering, pain, and tears. The gospel of Christ is not casual. It is not reserved for those who say the right words while their lives speak of precisely the opposite.<sup>1</sup>

The beautiful psalm appointed for today was composed by someone who understood this kind of justice that lives in the heart of the Creator.

“For he does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;  
neither does he hide his face from them;  
but when they cry to him he hears them.”

It may not seem that way in this unequal and unjust society of ours. In times of distress, we cry out: “Does God not hear us?” And then we remember Gethsemane and Christ’s tears and sweat, and the terrible silence Jesus endured. Yet, He obeyed God and carried His cross.

And that’s what Jesus’ cross-carrying was truly about. Not dragging a large wooden instrument of torture through the streets of Jerusalem, but doing it out of obedience to God the Father, and in laying down His life unselfishly for others. What Christ was asking of Peter and His faithful disciples is the same as He asks of us today: Die to yourself; live for God; further His Kingdom instead of your own desires and ambitions or what the world tells you will make you happy. Obey whatever the Lord asks you to do, no matter how hard it may be.

Today’s Old Testament Lesson and St. Paul’s Epistle both speak of faith and covenants and promises fulfilled because of Abraham’s trust in God. Jesus’ trust in God brought *Him* to the cross—that Sacrifice our best means of understanding Christ when He warns us of the cost of following Him.

And yet, who would *not* want to follow Jesus? As Peter said, inspired by the Holy Spirit: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68b-69). Thanks be to God! *Amen*.

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Katerina Katsarka Whitley, “The Most Difficult Path to Follow,” 28 February 2021, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-most-difficult-path-to-follow-lent-2-b-february-28-2021/) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-most-difficult-path-to-follow-lent-2-b-february-28-2021/>> Used with permission.