

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

February 28, 2021 – LENT 2, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*The Hard Life of the Cross ... Makes us More Like Jesus*”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (God makes a permanent covenant with Abraham)
Psalm 22:22-30 (A vision of the “Shalom” which the Messiah alone can bring)
Romans 4:13-25 (We are saved by faith, which is credited to us as righteousness)
St. Mark 8:31-38 (To follow Jesus, we must take up our ‘cross’)

Do you want Jesus to take away your troubles like a Xanax or some Oxycodone? Or for God to fix everything as easily as your mechanic, so you can come back in two hours with the car ready to drive? Do you want a savior who will solve all your problems so you won't have to live such a hard life?

Oops. *Wrong savior!* Despite many centuries of misguided and troubling theologies about the Cross, and in contrast to some contemporary praise songs that contradict Jesus' own words about the Cross, our Lord says it so plainly and directly it almost slaps the disciples—and us, too—in the face: “If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me and for the good news, you will save it” (Mk. 8:34-35, ESV).

Jesus continues in verse 38: “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.” Wow. That bears some serious thinking about.

Let us, for just a moment, open a window on history, to take a peek at a believer who lived what Jesus taught. His name was Jan Hus, and he lived from 1364 to 1415. Hus was a Czech priest, pastor of the Bethlehem church in Prague, where 3,000 people came weekly to hear him proclaim the Gospel.

He read the works and life of the great John Wycliffe—the first person to translate the Bible into English. And in his preaching, Hus stressed the importance and absolute authority of Holy Scripture, while emphasizing personal piety and purity of life. As such, Hus lifted Biblical preaching to an unprecedented height in church services.

Then, the archbishop of Prague had the works of John Wycliffe burned, and ordered Jan to stop preaching. Hus refused. The archbishop issued a condemnation of the priest, and removed him from his pastorate. Hus was forced into the open air to preach because no pulpit was made available to him. But the common people gladly heard him. Pastor Jan claimed that Jesus, and Jesus alone, could save us from the judgment of sin. Moreover, he preached that the Church was not the saving agent, and that only Christ was the Head of the Church—not the Pope.

In 1415, Jan Hus was arrested and condemned to die for heresy. He was placed in a damp prison cell for an extended period of time, his tormentors hoping to break his will, force him to recant, and use him as an example to others. But Jan would not budge. He said, “I would not, for a chapel full of gold, recede from the truth.”

On July 16, 1415 he was taken away to be burned at the stake. While being carried out, he was heard to proclaim, “God is my witness that the evidence against me is false, I have never thought or preached except with one intention: Of winning men, if possible from their sins.” The fire was lit, and as the flames engulfed him, Hus began to sing a Latin Christian chant, “Christ, thou Son of the Living God, have mercy on me.”

This faithful pastor and martyr is a clear example that the Word of God and the Person of Jesus Christ are worth any price, including the ultimate sacrifice.¹

Most of us would prefer a life in which only *Jesus* bore the pain, suffered and died, a life in which Jesus carries all our sorrows and lifts all our burdens. But Jesus knows that for us to become more like Him, we must do some cross-carrying of our own. At the same time, Christ has shown us that as hard as life can get, even with all its blood, tears, pain, and death, the mercy of God is always covering us overhead, and supporting us underneath. As St. Paul reminds us in Romans 8:39, “nothing—whether in life or death—can separate us from the love of God in Christ.”

Now, if we are candid with ourselves, we may admit that it is often the hard things in life that end up showing us who we truly are, what we are made of, and what really matters. It is only the struggles we work through—successfully or not—that teach us both the limits and the grandeur of being human. It is only our acceptance of suffering as a necessary part of the human condition that draws us together and unites us as one in our fragile, humble reality. It is only in confronting our own mortality and placing our lives wholly in God’s merciful arms, in His loving embrace, that we can fully and truly live.

If Jesus took away our struggles, griefs, hard work, and suffering, He would be taking away a major part of what gives meaning to our lives, as mysterious, inscrutable, and discouraging as this may seem to us. But if we let Jesus carry the Cross alone, without carrying ours alongside Him, we will empty His ministry of some of its purpose and remain left with little that is meaningful to do.

By calling us to a challenging life of discipline, self-sacrifice, and patiently loving others, Jesus actually gives us back our God-ordained lives. He teaches us the blessings of the “first becoming last,” and of “serving, rather than being served.” Or, as we say in a familiar prayer, “of consoling, rather than being consoled,” of “understanding, rather than being understood,” and of “giving so that we may receive,” of “pardoning so that we may be pardoned,” and of “dying so that we will be born to eternal life.”²

When we willingly take up our cross, Jesus gives us lives that are not about our small selves only, but about God’s bigger picture—which, ultimately, is our becoming more like Christ. And as we become more like Him, Jesus opens us up to the cruelty and injustice in the world, and gets us to say, “Maybe I ought to do something about this.” Aha! *Right savior!*³

Jan Hus and many other Christians were martyred for their faith in 15th-century Europe, but right now, at this very moment, Christians around the world are being persecuted and killed for their faith. Their homes and churches are being torched and bombed, their clergy and religious imprisoned, tortured, and executed. These brave souls show us the true meaning of taking up our cross for Jesus, and are living testimonies to Jesus’ words about not being ashamed of Christ, so that Christ will not be ashamed of them.

May God grant us the strength and courage of these faithful saints and martyrs to follow Jesus, no matter what. And, as hard as that may be, it will be the life God has chosen for us, through which He will polish and refine us into believers who are fit to share eternity with Him. Amen.

¹ Adapt. Ken Pell, “Windows from History,” July 2007, [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/windows-from-history-ken-pell-sermon-on-discipleship-108916.asp?Page=1) <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/windows-from-history-ken-pell-sermon-on-discipleship-108916.asp?Page=1>> 28 February 2015.

² From “A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (NY: Church Publishing, 1979), p. 833

³ Adapt. Michael Coffey, “Oops! Wrong Savior,” 27 February 2012 <<http://mccoffey.blogspot.com/2012/02/oops-wrong-savior.html>> 28 February 2015.