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### The God We Don't Expect

**READ:** Matthew 16:24-25 (Common English Bible)

*“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them.’”*

**REFLECT:**

Of all Jesus' disciples—save perhaps Judas Iscariot—it is Peter Simon, that lowly fisherman, who comes across to us from the pages of history as the most fully realized and most fully human. The Gospels paint him as a man of great, seismic contradictions: confident enough in his faith to leap upon the waters of Galilee yet doubtful enough to sink below them; brave enough to attack the Sanhedrin in Gethsemane, yet frightened enough to deny Christ three times in the high priest's courtyard. In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, we see yet another demonstration of Peter's conflicted faithfulness. Upon reaching Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples “Who do people say the Human One is?” Eleven of them mutter noncommittally, but Peter leaps in: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Many forget that when Jesus first began his ministry, he hid his lineage as the Son of God from his followers, instead presenting himself as a rabbi preaching radical reform of Jewish tradition in the face of Roman imperialism. It was here, in this moment, that a fisherman's faith revealed Jesus' true identity to the world.

In response, Jesus praises Peter and declares him the rock upon which he will build his church. But pay very close attention to what happens next, particularly to the language used in the Common English Bible translation. After Jesus explains his mission to suffer and die at the hand of their Roman oppressors, Peter “took hold” of him, “scolds” him, and “began to correct him.” Certainly Jesus, the promised Messiah, would tear down the Romans, reunite the Twelve Tribes, and restore the Davidic monarchy to power once and for all. Yet Jesus savagely scolds him with one of the most cutting rebukes in scripture: “Get behind me, Satan.”

But just as Jesus condemns he comforts, immediately informing Peter and the rest of the disciples that his is not the way of meek surrender, but the path to everlasting life. Again, pay close attention to the language: “All who want to come after me must *say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.*” [Emphasis mine] We find three demands—one of self-denial, one of self-sacrifice, and one of self-submission. First, we must reject all our preconceptions about who God is or what God wants. Second, we must humble ourselves before him in front of the whole world. And third, we must follow in his footsteps, not in the footsteps we proscribe for him.

Peter's mistake wasn't his lack of faith, rather its willfully misguided application. Unable to envision a Messiah who didn't avenge and conquer, he literally tried to seize and bully God incarnated in flesh. And how often have we seen the same thing happen today? It seems we can't turn on a TV or open a newspaper without hearing or reading somebody screeching about what God wants or what God needs. God has become a cudgel with which to assault political adversaries, a club to self-righteously attack those who don't fall into the proper ideological or moral line. In these troubling, divisive times, we must look to the words of the Gospel of Matthew: to find one's life, one must lose it. Just as Peter was rebuked, so we must rebuke ourselves and humbly follow.

