

A Sermon from the Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018
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St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Barrington, IL
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Today's Gospel reading comes at a turning point in Mark's Gospel. The first half of the Gospel—chapters 1 through half of 8—retells Jesus's miracles—his healings and parables and teachings. He walks on water and feeds five thousand people. He heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, and even raises the dead.

But in today's Gospel, we see a shift: away from a ministry of healing and preaching, and towards a ministry of suffering, death, and resurrection.

Just before today's reading, Jesus and His disciples are walking, on their way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. They're probably enjoying a beautiful summer day—bright sun and warm breeze. That area, in modern day Golan Heights, is known for being lush and full of life. This isn't another wandering through a desert; this is a pleasant stroll past waterfalls and natural springs.

And Jesus begins asking questions. I imagine everyone was just enjoying the journey and, out of nowhere, Jesus starts talking. The disciples are probably just “la-ti-da”-ing, giving answers without much thought, until they realize this is for real.

Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” And so the disciples start giving answers: “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

You may recall this part of Mark's gospel—it's kind of a pivotal moment.

And then, after hearing what others say Jesus is, he asks “But who do you say that I am?”

And Peter, oh blessed Peter, Peter speaks up and says, “You are the Messiah.”

You see, Peter is now, officially, the first disciple to name Jesus for who he really is. The Messiah! The Christ! The Savior!

And they keep walking.

Well, first, Jesus “sternly orders” the disciples not to tell anyone who he is (Messianic Secret, much?), and then they keep walking.

And Jesus keeps talking.

And today's Gospel reading begins.

So, imagine, taking a stroll through a beautiful landscape, enjoying a wonderful sunny day—no big crowds, no pressure to perform—just you and your buddies, heading to the next village. And one of your friends starts saying these crazy things!

“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.”

Like, what? Hold on! I was distracted by that bird, flying over there.

Can you say that again?

Suffering? Rejection? Death?

But we just said you were the Messiah!?!?

It's not our fault you don't want us to tell anyone!

And naturally Peter...

You know, Peter is like that one friend, maybe there's a little bit of each of us in Peter—I know there's a bit of me in Peter...

Peter pulls Jesus aside and is like, “Dude! Stop! You're messing with our awesome mojo! Don't start talking about suffering and death. Besides, You're the Messiah! You can change all that!”

I can see it all unfold like a scene in a movie...

Jesus looks Peter right in the eyes, throws Peter's hand off of Jesus's arm, and through slightly clenched teeth, does that whisper-yell: “Get behind me, Satan!”

Whoa!!! Man! Calm down!

There's no need for name-calling! We're just saying... like, come on... you're the Messiah! You don't **need** to suffer and die!

...

But actually, he does. Actually, as we all know, Jesus does have to suffer and die. He does have to be betrayed and denied (by none other than our special friend Peter). And he does have to rise from the dead.

In today's reading, when Jesus says, “The Son of Man **must** undergo great suffering,” it's not just a necessity. It's not like, “I must go to the grocery store today to buy milk.”

It's not just inevitable. Instead, it's a part of God's plan.

Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of Man, and it is God's will that Jesus suffers and dies.

And maybe that is why Peter is silenced here. And maybe that is why the disciples are silenced when they name Jesus as the Messiah. And maybe that is why, throughout Mark's Gospel, the demons and the healed are all silenced when they name Jesus as the Son of Man or the Son of God.

Maybe, the message of Jesus as the Messiah must be silenced because it does not include the required suffering.

After all, at that time, a messiah was a king, coming to bring a new order, a new reign of the Jews. For Peter and the disciples and those whom Jesus fed and healed, a messiah would overthrow the Romans, with great power and glory, ascending to a royal throne, wearing a crown of gold.

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Martin Luther—the medieval theologian who, legend has it, nailed 95 theses to the door of Catholic church, which ultimately led to the creation of the Lutheran Church...

He saw this dichotomy—the conflict of *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis*. Or a Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross.

Theologia gloriae (theology of glory) is based on preconceived assumptions about how a god is expected to act in the world.

Theologia crucis (theology of the Cross) is based on the revelation of God's suffering and death.

Peter's Messiah is part of the *theologia gloriae*, upholding what the people want in and expect from God.

Jesus's self-revelation, though, is *theologia crucis*, a contradiction of what everyone imagines God should be.

These two sides offer the two sides of Lent and Easter. The cross points to Jesus's suffering and death. It is theology of the cross that Jesus foretells at the beginning of today's Gospel reading.

And yet Peter doesn't want that. He doesn't want a Christ who fulfills *theologia crucis*. Instead, Peter wants a Christ who fulfills *theologia gloriae*.

This dichotomy, this conflicting theology, this desire to jump ahead—to skip the cross, the suffering, the death—and go straight to the glory, the resurrection, to Easter. It is not unusual.

After all, we are People of the Resurrection, right? We are "Easter People," as the Most Reverend Katherine Jefferts Schori said in her 2014 Easter message.

But we cannot be people of the Resurrection unless we are first People of the Crucifixion. We cannot be Easter People, transformed by resurrection, unless we are first Cross People—Holy Week People—Passion People—Lenten People. People who follow a Messiah who first is broken—who first suffers and dies.

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No one wants to think of the suffering that Jesus went through. So many of us would rather just gloss over that part and go straight to the *gloriae*. And yet Jesus cannot be our Messiah unless he is also crucified. He cannot be our Savior and Redeemer unless he also is our Sufferer.

Jesus tells us this in today's Gospel reading. As He continues His message, Jesus tells the disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

That is exactly what Martin Luther is naming, too. The conflict between this life and the next, between this world's concept of a messiah and the true concept of our Messiah.

And perhaps that is why this time of the year is always so hard. Perhaps this idea of a suffering Messiah, of *theologia crucis*, of Holy Week and Good Friday, of Jesus's decent to the dead... perhaps that is why we would rather jump ahead to Easter and the Resurrection. Perhaps that is why, like Peter, we don't want to hear Jesus's foretelling of His Passion.

We like the pretty image of a Messiah who sits on a throne. We like the standard, all-powerful image of a King who comes in Glory.

We signed on for a crown! Not a Cross!

And yet, we do not get the crown without the cross.

We do not get the "coming in glory" without the "going with suffering and humility."

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I don't think Jesus is telling us that we need to all go out and suffer for our faith.

I really don't think Jesus is saying that we must all be martyrs for Christ, or else we will not reach that salvation promised to us by Christ.

But, I do think Jesus wants us to know that **that** is just as real. **That** is just as true of a Christian faith, a Christian commitment, as what we do daily, in our own lives.

We are not forced to decide between life and Christ. And yet, we are still called to be People of the Cross.

But there is good news. The good news—the Gospel—it is that our faith does not end there, at the foot of the cross. Our theology and our Messianic understanding does not end with Jesus Christ dying on a cross.

We know what comes next; we know that Jesus will rise; we know that death is not the end.

But, before we get to the Resurrection, we do have to sit with the crucifixion. Before we get to Easter, we have to be in Lent...

...

Jesus calls Peter “Satan” when he rebukes him for denying the suffering of Christ.

This is not name-calling or bullying.

This is like a foreshadowing but going backwards. This is a recall to what we read last week—what happened as Jesus began his ministry.

If you remember, after Jesus was baptized, according to Mark’s Gospel, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan...”

Jesus is not calling Peter “Satan” to be mean to his friend. He is calling Peter “Satan” because Peter is, yet again, tempting Jesus to be a different kind of Messiah.

Peter sees the Messiah as a king—ruler of a kingdom—just as Satan sought for Jesus to become.

And yet, Jesus knows the truth. And so Jesus rebukes Peter for wanting the will of humans over the Will of God.

It is God’s Will that our Messiah suffers and dies on a cross before He resurrects. And Jesus is pointing out that anything less, anything else, is really a temptation from Satan.

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And so, as we continue this journey through Lent. As we continue to progress in our own 40 days of temptation and deprivation. As we slowly move towards the Cross, we must know that Jesus is not just the Messiah of the Resurrection. This is not just a *theologia gloriae*, a theology of glory. But Jesus is also the Messiah of suffering and death. He must also fulfill the *theologia crucis*.

Yes, we do know how the story ends, and yes it ends with glory. But before then, just as Jesus foretold in today’s gospel reading, there must be great suffering, and there must be death.

And so, for now, we are asked to sit with that—to be part of the *theologia crucis* that focuses on the Cross. To know that yes, Jesus is the Messiah, but He is a messiah that must suffer and die. And we must be willing to take up our own crosses, our own suffering, our own death, before we can celebrate the glory of Jesus at the Resurrection, before we can join in with the *gloriae*.

So don’t give up hope. Yes, focus on the Cross, but know that the Resurrection is coming soon. And then, **then**, we can celebrate a *theologia gloriae*.

Amen.

