

Second Sunday in Lent

GENESIS 9:8-17

PSALM 25:1-10

ROMANS 3:18-22

MARK 1:9-15

February 25, 2024

The Crux of the Cross, a Crucible in the Making!

Shortly after the death, and all the reports of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the apostle Paul would say to the Corinthian church, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God!” (I Corinthians 1:18). Not going to happen! No way in hell, as in gates of hell that will not prevail! Not today, not tomorrow, not the next day, not next week, next month, next year. Never! Never! Never! There was no way Peter was ever going to let anyone lay a hand on Jesus, no way he would let any harm come to his rabbi, his brother, friend, guide, and mentor, no way Jesus would be sold-out with a one-way ticket on a dead-end road headed for the cross as his final stop, his ultimate destination. There was no way Peter would allow Jesus to be arrested, tried, and crucified, executed as a common criminal. No way! No how! No, we will fight to the death for you! After all, as Peter once said when Jesus suggested to his disciples that they would indeed eventually, inevitably, abandon him, “Lord, to whom would we go, for you have the words of eternal life?” (John 6:68). Good question! Unfortunately, this sincere sentiment turned out to amount to nothing more than wishful thinking, a false promise, a not so well-disguised disingenuous hopeful dream, a sincere but very dishonest answer. None of this level of loyalty would ever materialize because the proof would never happen in the proverbial pudding, all the disciples suddenly on the lamb, running for cover and hiding as fugitives, held up in unknown and unsafe locations, after “it” all hit the fan! And as we all know full well, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” our best assumptions and actions, sometimes never meeting our lofty goals, any of our noble expectations, our best aspirational pursuits. But if we are honest, we tend to cut the disciples at least some slack, giving them a much needed if not well-deserved break because we understand the immense pressure that was present, palpably

so, because the unbearable stress overwhelming them was more than any average mortal, any human being striving to be committed to the cause in that high calling could withstand.

Today we read Mark's abbreviated version of what was probably Jesus' most difficult lesson to his disciples, their hardest pill to swallow, as the rabbi painstakingly described for them, vividly spelling out for them in greatest detail, what he perceived to be his, and perhaps theirs, impending suffering and death march. Obviously, the imperial Roman rulers had heard rumblings and now the authorities were hot on his heels, in no way even tolerating the remotest possibility, the slightest rumor, even a miniscule hint of a coup, any idle chatter suggesting a potential insurrection, a whiff of seditious behavior. Yes, the man was coming for the rabbi and evidently was coming fast, the warp speed of the arduous journey to Jerusalem about ready to take flight, all the ups and downs, every twist and turn, about to be in play. The early Church presumed that Jesus knew every detail concerning his destiny as if he was the most clairvoyant individual ever created, knowing that his fate had been sealed from the foundation of the earth. Yes, the legend exponentially grew after his execution by crucifixion, a death that the rabbi purposefully predicted, including the radical promise of his resurrection. **The writer of the Gospel of Mark tells the reader then and now that Jesus began to teach them about all the horrific events to come, a word that was not well-received by any of the recipients, especially by Peter, Peter, always Peter, the vocal one, who quickly rebuked such silly notions. After all, it is always Peter who opens his big mouth, never able to contain whatever he was thinking in a pivotal moment, the Rock always suffering from a bad case of foot-in-mouth disease. But give Simon a half a point of credit, for indeed he would be the one who would disobey Jesus' peacemaking rules and strike a soldier on the ear as a legion of the Roman military attempted to apprehend the obviously dangerous rabbi. And who could blame Peter? This sometimes-rock-solid disciple was only saying what everybody else was thinking but was too timid to admit it.** Yes, surely the humble peacemaking teacher, the erstwhile peasant reformer, posed a huge, an ever-present danger, the peacenik a clear threat to the legions of infantry charged with protecting Caesar and all his empire, including occupied Israel and surrounding areas. **Question I have often wondered, why was Peter carrying a sword in the first place? Just curious!** The Gospel interpreter tells us in a carefully

woven story that Jesus clearly stated all these things about his impending doom and death, plainly so, making sure they heard his words with crystal clarity, no confusion, no misinterpretation possible, his unwanted news, his painful words coming at them like a dagger, stabbing them right in the heart, the very worst news possible. No nuance! No subtlety! No doubt the waves of emotions rushing over them were more than they could handle, more than their fragile and weary systems could tolerate. Frankly, Jesus telling his disciples, his innermost circle, that he would be killed for the cause did not take much imagination or the intuitive prowess of a great prophet, or the intuition of a prognosticator, predicting this outcome as easy as basic math, the writing long on the wall, the rabbi's fate sealed with every monumental move he made. No, it did not take a Genie out of the bottle, a crystal ball, some magical soothsayer, no fortuneteller, to see this nightmare scenario coming. **From this day forward, Jesus, the man of mystery and intrigue, magical and mystical in so many ways, was as good as dead. As the movie once intoned, "Dead man walking!"**

One of the things that fascinates me, and not at all in a good way whatsoever, is the propensity of numerous, progressive Christians and the churches they attend, to remove the cross along with any vestige associated with the negative imagery, any semblance, of sure and certain danger, shadows of darkness and death inherently bound in every crucifixion tableau. Many, of course, do not abandon this sacred symbol of the faith of our forebears. This intentional removal, in what I consider a rather heinous act, is by design thought to be carried out because these deathly images are considered roadblocks, a dead-end, if you will, an impediment to church growth, the proverbial "outreach" card often played in our local missional settings, any ecclesial outpost. Everything needs to be "bright and beautiful" as the wonderful hymn sings, a positively uplifting experience that keeps the reality of death at bay, our mortality on hold as if we could ever dismiss, delay, deny, defer, or deflect. But it is not only within the confines of progressive congregational environs that disdain and disregard for the cross has gained momentum as a priority, a paramount feature of nondisclosure, conservative churches as well have joined the party in this heretical practice, including the throngs who gather to revel in the prosperity gospel characterized by happy-clappy, Bible-thumping pep rallies for Jesus, evangelistic aficionados in these shops marketing shallow Pollyanna platitudes of

pietistic prophecies, believing that theology is not only to be minimized but is considered a waste of time, never uplifting or spiritually satisfying, serving as a barrier, an obstacle, to church growth practices and theories. **Many, of course, do not abandon this sacred symbol of the faith of our forebears.** In fact, there are some who would misuse the cross. Take for example right wing conspiracy theorist Jack Posobiec, speaking as a panelist at CPAC (Conservative Political Action Convention) on Wednesday, “I just wanted to say, welcome to the end of democracy. We are here to overthrow it completely. We didn’t get all the way there on January 6, but we will endeavor to get rid of it.” Holding up a cross, he added, “We’ll replace it with this right here. That’s right, because all glory, all glory is not to government, all glory is to God.” To paraphrase the late Waylon Jennings, singing about Hank Williams, “I don’t think Jesus done it this way!” **I guess you could say the cross is at a crossroads! Supposedly, the cross is the antithesis to a kinder and gentler, a more acceptable, yes, palpable, Christendom, Christianity lite perhaps, easily digestible,** all characterized by a never was Camelot based in the theologically lightweight promises proffered in the presumed power of positive thinking. Years ago, I saw the advertisements for a mainline denominational congregation in the Atlanta area, a suburban church that was promoting a forty day “Godhunt” to take place during the season of Lent. All well and good, very creative, save for one problem, except for a major oversight, a huge omission, the Lenten season was nowhere to be found in their paraphernalia, not even the slightest mention of Lent, the cross looming small, actually not at all, nowhere in sight, nowhere to be found, total avoidance, ignorance, as in ignore, the concept of such obviously manifest as misconception, the worst kind of propagandized misinformation.

And so, we are confronted by texts such as this pivotal Gospel story in the Markan narrative laid bare before us today, a text that warns of eminent doom and disaster, a road more than less traveled if truth be told. We can choose to avoid and ignore, running for the metaphorical hills of denial and dismissal, choosing not to read it, or even worse, replace it with a more “suitable,” a text that is more soothing for the spirit. We want something that will assuage our troubled souls, insuring a warm and fuzzy for the day. Yes, that is the option for many! Or we can put on our big boy and big girl pants and read the text and wrestle with its profound implications, poignant words that cut to the bone,

sharper than a two-edged sword, biblical words that remind us that life is fragile and fleeting, a pearl of great price, yes, the fact that Jesus would become dust, until he was not, as would his disciples and all of us, all in the hope of resurrection reality, raised to new life. The difference is that Jesus just happened to have a clearer sense of the means and mode, and of course the timing, of his date with destiny, his dance with death, as dirty and disgusting as those last few hours of his life truly were. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian extraordinaire, doing his own Alexei Navalny imitation by going back to Germany, as he soberly returned from a visit to the United States to the not-so-safe confines of his Deutschland homeland. Bonhoeffer knew in his gut, deep in his spirit, yes, this prophetic figure knew full well that he had signed his own death warrant upon his reentry, fully aware that the Nazis would surely have him executed. Of course, it did not help his cause that he participated in a plot to assassinate Hitler! But I digress! Bonhoeffer's martyrdom would be a witness in perpetuity, a great testimony for all time, joining the throngs throughout history as their light shines in what seems to be ultimate and endless darkness, the brightness of dawn always hopefully on the horizon. Sounds more than vaguely familiar, the irony now being that Navalny was safe in Germany, far removed from the torture and murder in a Siberian gulag, his death perversely perhaps a liberation for this freedom fighter, who stood firm for justice in all its many humanitarian forms. In his bestselling treatise, *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer goes into greatest detail discussing just what it means to follow Jesus, reminding his reader that Jesus and his call was one exuding authentic self, emanating the essence of genuine courage and being, revealing an honest level of integrity that was transparent in every way imaginable, a gift emboldening, empowering, anyone brave enough to courageously own it, even a modicum of it, in their lives. **Basically, Bonhoeffer's premise was that grace is absolutely, entirely, free, but it comes with a heavy price tag, an immense cost, costing as much as the life of the one who dares take up their individual cross and follow, with all the implications loaded into that overwhelmingly heavy image. It is a reminder that while Jesus welcomed everyone, he knew that what he was saying, what he was doing, what he was advocating, would be off-putting to many, more than just a few, that it would never be for everyone. Many would sign on the dotted line only to regret their profession and their promise and turn away from a communally relational**

journey that no doubt was filled with lonely moments. As Jesus would say, “many are called but few are chosen!” (Matthew 22:14).

And no, Christianity was not intended to be a dour, a sour, unhappy, miserably joyless enterprise, a loser exercise in futility and morbidity. And therein is the irony, perhaps the ultimate irony, of choosing to live this life, to take up this mantle in a passionate desire to follow this Jesus, to make the life-altering, life-changing, decision to embrace the Spirit of Christ that is ever available, pervasively present, and yet, unfortunately or so it seems, as if some of the time, if not most of the time, elusive, even lacking and unsatisfying, far removed, far away in a distant galaxy. So once Jesus had cleared the room, scattering the curious, the skeptical, the cynical, and the fence straddlers, he got down to business, declaring his promise of crosses and crucifixions, of darkness and death. My hunch is he then gathered the smaller gathering together and began to teach them what it would look like, yes, what it would cost, graphically portraying for them what the rocky road ahead would be like, fully manifest in their midst, if they chose to stay his narrow course with no assurance of personal safety, no safe haven in sight. He offered them no Yellow Brick road in this wilderness journey, no bed of roses amidst this briar patch of thorns. Perhaps this is why we have taken artistic license with the cross and recreated this symbol of death to fit a more acceptable, palatable, image, even as we believe it has been incarnated, recalibrated and retrofitted, to use one of my favorite phrases, as symbolic of life and resurrective power. We proudly wear crosses around our necks as a sign, except when we fail to consider its worth, what that sign means, yes, that for which it stands. Whether it be the simplest or most ornate jewelry, or sometimes boldly tattooed on various body parts, the cross is a ubiquitous symbol. Somehow, dressing it up as the finest accessory, some accoutrement, a little bling, takes out the sting, takes out the stench, but at least it is still visible and viable, let us hope vital. And yet, within the confines of many church sanctuaries the cross is literally becoming an irrelevant vestige of the past, a depressing sacramental relic, relegated to the dustbin of history, yes, obsolete, passé, perhaps outmoded, surely yesterday’s news. Oh, the irony! **Jesus’ teaching was a reminder that all of us who claim Christ are called to take up a cross that is uniquely ours to carry. Our belief and faith are secure, fully trusting in the way of Jesus is our guide, the pathway we follow, the footprints we make as we follow in his precious footsteps.** Yes,

our crosses are proprietary in every way, maybe many crosses if we are not too careful. The cross should not be a millstone around our necks but a precious gift, call it a Christian talisman, the luggage we gladly, joyfully, carry, a yoke that is lite and light and never a burden, never heavy, weighty, baggage. Yes, our crosses appear on the horizon in the myriad bellwether moments of our lives! **Yes, every cross comes embossed with our names stamped on them, imprimaturs of the promises we have made to God, to one another in beloved faith communities and to our unknown and unnamed neighbors, and, of course, to ourselves, fueling the personal mantra that is our conscience, our internal clock, all that drives who we are as human beings created in the divine image.**

So once again when we hear a sermon about the cross and our collective crosses, what then do we do, what shall we do, knowing full well that our crosses are least likely to bite us on the proverbial backside. The odds of us being terrorized or tortured, persecuted in any way, of even being martyred for the cause, uh cross, is so miniscule it almost does not merit a word of conversation. In our ecclesial universe we are thousands of times more likely to be hit by lightning, targeted in some way, because of another symbol near and dear to us, the rainbow, than we are from a harmless cross. Odds are we will never be killed for our faith when it is put into practice. Literally, in “all” likelihood, we will not suffer the fate of the Kennedys, the three Mississippi freedom, King, Evers, X, Harvey Milk, or Jesus! So, as we often conclude in our conversations about this sacred symbol, we know that our crosses are opportunities, opportunities for service born of gratitude for the generosity that God has blessed in our lives. For every opportunity is an opportunity! Every day, as individuals in our daily walk, and as a beloved faith community informed and impacted, emboldened and empowered, by an acute missional awareness realized in the sacred moments of our being and doing as real time ministry response. **We see the needs all around us and beyond, social justice the wonderful umbrella, call it a rainbow in and of itself, that calls us to action in big and small ways, as we hear and answer the clarion call of the great commission to all nations, to all people, accepting and affirming the ancient call to be a follower of the way, yes, the holy ways of the man from Nazareth, Jesus, the one called Christ. So, we find our crosses as we find all those in need, right where they are, sometimes crosses revealed even in who they are, in the simplest acts of offering all the many metaphorical cups of cold water that warm**

the heart and calm the mind. Yes, indeed we sense, we feel, the Spirit as it blows as we feed, quench, clothe, visit, and simply serve as one among many bridges to humanity in all the ways that human connections, cultural and otherwise, need and must be met. This is our lot! This is our cross! May we take up each one with conviction, answering the call of Christ, and literally, take up the cross uniquely crafted, personally designed, for each and every one of us, the details coming into view, our focus getting clearer by the day, as we carry them one by one, yes, blessings all, gifts from God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and calls us to carry our cross daily, “our” being the operative word! Amen and amen!