

Lent 2 (B)
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Text: Mark 8:31-38

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Last year during the summer we went to Arkansas to visit my parents. They live on a bend in the White River, just a few miles below the Bull Shoals Dam. It's green and beautiful... and in the summer sometimes it gets pretty hot and muggy. There was one sweltering hot day when we went to the little state park that overlooks the dam. They have a visitors' center with a little museum, and it's air-conditioned inside. So we spent a good part of one afternoon checking out all the exhibits at the museum. There were aquariums with bass and trout and all sorts of fish and turtles that live in the lake and in the river. The exhibit that caught my eye was an historical exhibit dealing with life on the river before the dam was built.

Each year when the rains came in the spring, the river would rise, and most years that was a good thing, because it meant the steamboats could get further up river to bring in supplies and carry away huge bales of cotton. But some years there was flooding, and it was bad. And sometimes it was really bad. Those were known as the 100 year floods. There were some pictures of the devastation caused by a 100 year flood. Whole towns were washed away. Homes and businesses were destroyed. After a 100 year flood, some people would just grab what they could and leave. But others stayed around to rebuild their homes, to help their neighbors, to restore their communities. It looked like really hard work. But it also looked like important work; saving work.

In our gospel story for today, Jesus was facing his own personal 100 year flood. God had called him to be about the work of embodying God's way of forgiveness and acceptance for everyone, to announce the reign of God and call the whole world to live under God's gracious and generous rule, where the division between haves and have-nots would be erased, where there would be enough for everyone, where violence and war would be a thing of the past, where all live in peace. But Jesus knew that if he was true to who God called him to be, there was going to be a collision with the religious and imperial powers, because they existed by virtue of division—between haves and have-nots, between clean and unclean—and violence was the tool of their trade. So Jesus was under no illusion about what they would do to him. They would make an example of him, make him suffer and put him to death on a cross. But Jesus also trusted that God would not let such a judgment stand. God would overturn the judgment of those with power, and raise him from the dead, because in Jesus' life and work, God was creating something new, a new future for the whole human family.

So in our reading for today Jesus warns his followers that if they are going to continue his work, they will find it costly. Following him does not lead to more of the way things have always been for the human family. It leads to something new, something beautiful. It leads to relationships being transformed by the power of God's love. It will lead to society be refashioned by God's priorities, and finally, it will lead to the whole world being given new life. But Jesus says, "Be warned: the old order of things is not going to give way easily. If you want to follow me, give up your desire for a nice little life for your self. Let go of your dreams of indulging and pampering your self. Instead, take up your cross and follow me."

It's such a profoundly powerful—and shocking!—image. Take up your cross—your instrument of painful, shameful death, of public execution—and follow me. Having a cross to bear isn't to endure the ordinary pains and losses of life. It isn't having arthritis, or an unpleasant boss, or noisy neighbors. For Jesus, the cross was the direct consequence of being faithful to God and true to his calling. But for Jesus the cross also becomes an instrument for... saving work. By his innocent suffering and death, Jesus unmask the ugly truth about how the human family does its business, showing us how we have all been trapped by our desires and our fears, so that we can never be truly free. But through this ordeal, Jesus will show, for everyone to see, that God will stop at nothing to give us a new life, to open a new door for the human family to live with God and know the joy of life that is rooted in the good that God desires.

Jesus' call comes to us also—to follow him, to take up our cross—to shoulder the consequences of surrendering our lives to God's purposes, but to know that such a surrender is to be given important work, saving work, that fills our hearts because it is our true life, our true destiny. Our country—in truth, the whole world—is going through a time of economic trial that is like a 100 year flood. People and whole communities are being swept away. I wonder, during this time, what it might mean to follow Jesus. What would it look like for us, in this time, to take up our cross—to shoulder the consequences of being Jesus' followers, of being faithful to God's vision for justice and compassion, forgiveness and generosity? Are there neighbors who need our help, our serving and caring, to rebuild our communities?

We aren't the only generation of God's people to face such a challenge. Through nearly 2000 years, the community of Jesus has sought to embody his way of living, and has often shown it with courage and boldness and compassion. In the earliest years of the church, when disease would strike a region, lots of people would flee, abandoning any family or neighbors who were sick, leaving them to fend for themselves. But the Christians stayed to care for those who were ill. And guess who had the best chances of surviving—those

who were cared for. So the Christian movement grew because Christians were living out their faith. In the earliest years of the church, in pagan culture it was common for children born with disabilities to be abandoned. But Christians believed that life is a precious gift from God—so they adopted those abandoned children, who then grew up in the church, grew up learning to love God with their whole heart. And the Christian movement grew because Christians were living out their faith.

Again and again, the story of God's people is the story of following Jesus in the way of the cross. But the cross is not a way of self-negation or self-destruction. It is a conscious, intentional decision to set aside the clamoring of the self for "more," and instead embrace Jesus' way of compassion and generosity and forgiveness and peace. It's a way of living that takes one's eyes off of "me and mine and what I want," and looks to the needs of the neighbor, and in doing so becoming an instrument of God's power to save and transform.

Jesus called his followers then, and he calls us today, to see in him and in his way of living the greatest gift God gives—to find our truest life, our real identity, to receive the sort of life that is deep joy and blessing, not only for us but for all. Thanks be to God. Amen