

Texts: Genesis 17. 1-7, 15-16,
Psalm 22.23-31,
Romans 4.13-25,
Mark 8. 31-38

I can appreciate Peter's instincts in this passage from Mark's gospel. Peter has, after all, seen firsthand what we read about last week...the way in which Jesus' ministry from the very beginning was launched with the blessing of God as his mantle. In fact, in the verses just before our text, Peter, makes that very confession when he asserts that Jesus is the Messiah of God – the Blessed, Beloved, Anointed One.¹ If that is in fact who Jesus is then it makes sense to go to whatever lengths necessarily to protect that blessing of God that resides in Jesus. So when Jesus begins to talk about his coming suffering and death, Peter protests. How utterly bewildering Jesus' response must have felt to him. Here Peter stands and declares his loyalty and commitment to protect Jesus and Jesus call him Satan? Somehow his concern for Jesus' safety comes from the human realm and Jesus' talk of suffering is divine?

Peter isn't the only one who has struggled to understand what Jesus is talking about here. There are a lot of people who throw around the language of "taking up your cross." I'm not convinced they always do so with an accurate understanding of Jesus' teaching here. There are some who read this teaching about suffering and self-denial and cross bearing and conclude that the Christian life is to be characterized by these things. They almost revel in their own suffering; believing that the more they suffer the closer to Jesus they become as if suffering in and of itself were redemptive in some way.

Whenever I read this text, it brings me back to a time when I was in college and volunteering at a shelter for battered women. My role was to play with the children but on one day one of the mothers came down to play with us. When she learned that I was on my way to seminary, she told me what her pastor said to her when she went to him for help about what was happening at home. He actually told her that the abuse she was suffering from her

¹ Mark 8.29

husband was her cross to bear in this life and he would pray for her that she would find the strength to endure it.

Not having safety in your own home – not being able to feed your children – not being able to find the energy for your work because of depression or physical pain... I don't believe for one second that this is what Jesus had in mind when he told us to take up our cross and to follow him. Jesus was in the business of alleviating this kind of suffering. Everywhere he went that he encountered people hurting for lack of food or strength or love or understanding he gave to them what they needed. God created us for this world and desires that we flourish in it. The kind of suffering that takes our dignity and keeps us from being able to celebrate this life and to call it good is the kind of suffering we need to resist and fight against with all our strength. When Jesus talks about self-denial he is not talking about accepting *that* kind of suffering. So what did he mean?

I ran across a very interesting interpretation of this passage in an article I read by Joel Marcus. He quotes a Spartan poet, Tyrtaeus, from the seventh century BC, "The man who risks his life in battle has the best chance of saving it; the one who flees to save [his life] is the most likely to lose it...In other words, what is most important in the heat of battle is not to lose your head (either figuratively or literally)." If your main interest is to steer clear of danger – if survival instincts kick into gear that leads you to turn tail and run – you are a perfect target for being shot in the back. Whereas a bold and courageous soldier, who has set aside those self-protective instincts, can sometimes miraculously survive because they have acted in such a decisive and purposeful manner that it unnerves their enemy. Marcus claims that Jesus takes that kind of secular, military wisdom and interprets it here on a spiritual plane.²

When our focus and attention is given solely to our own survival – when we choose our path based on what we believe will keep us safe, make us happy, or bring success *as the world has defined those things*...we do become so taken up in human things that we cannot even see what it is that God is doing let alone participate in it. I worked with a couple once whose relationship was in trouble and the dynamics of their life are very common, I think. Somewhere early on when they were open and vulnerable with each other one or both of them experienced profound disappointment and determined to be more cautious. So

² Joel Marcus, "Uncommon Sense," *The Christian Century*, August 30, 2000.

they begin to share less and they begin to pretend more. After a while the resentment about what they are not getting from each other leads them to lash out a bit. The wounding continues and one or both begin to withdraw and withhold even more. By the time they get to me they are almost exclusively focused on the failings of their partner and fairly unable to see their own role in the relationship's demise...everything about their behavior is about attack or defend. They may know that the gospel calls them to offer grace and forgiveness to each other – to open themselves up and to tell each other their deepest truth. But then they panic when they remember how much they have been hurt and so they rigidly hold onto these patterns of attack and defend believing that it is the only the way that they will survive. So in their frantic attempts to save their lives they actually lose everything they ever wanted.

I heard a commentator on National Public Radio this week talking about the economic crisis we are in (is there any other topic of conversation these days?) I heard in their discussion a similar counter-intuition. For so long, our economy has survived (and in many cases flourished) as companies have operated out of a self-protective, self-interested, survival of the fittest kind of philosophy. Decisions were made based on the bottom line with very little concern for the inter-connections between their economic practices and the market as a whole - between Main Street and Wall Street as they now describe it. As things began to take a downward turn the frantic efforts on the part of some of these companies to cover their economic tails actually created their demise. Even more interesting: now that they are about to go under they make all these claims about how interconnected we all are - industry and government - Wall Street and Main Street. Never mind that those concerns were nowhere in view when they were enjoying the great blessing of their success.

There are really two principles at stake here that challenge us and the ways we operate in the world vs. the ways God operates in the world. The first has to do with the ecological nature of God's blessing. To say that Jesus began his ministry with the mantle of God's blessing on his shoulders, Peter thought of that blessing as something that resided in Jesus for the sake of Jesus....
....something that made him special, something that required his protection. But Jesus understood what we read here in Genesis in this story of Abraham and Sarah: that God's covenantal blessing is never meant to reside *in* one individual person. God doesn't bless us for the sake of our own blessing. The blessing of God is designed to flow through us to touch every living creature on earth.

Peter wanted, at all costs, for Jesus to survive. But Jesus knew that Peter's instincts could not be trusted. Survival wasn't the goal. The extension of God's blessing and God's kingdom - that was the goal. In order to do that Jesus had to go to Jerusalem. He had to speak his truth to the powers there and he knew that it would mean that they would call for his death. The challenge of the cross is to throw away the survival guide. If Jesus did what Peter wanted...if Jesus tried at all costs to save his life...he would have lost everything he came to do. And so when everyone else lost their head on the night of his arrest, Jesus stayed the course. And, yes, that did mean that his life ended. And from the perspective of *the world* it appeared as if his life ended in defeat. This would-be Messiah ends his life nailed to a Roman cross dying the most humiliating of deaths. That's how it appeared to those watching from the side lines: he came to establish God's kingdom but he ended up dead.

But, we know, that his life did *not* end in defeat but in unbelievable victory. Through that victory, we believe, that the Spirit who descended on Jesus in his baptism - this blessing of God was released into the world. In fact that Spirit comes to bless us in precisely the arenas of our lives that are touched and overwhelmed by weakness, suffering and death. Jesus pushed Peter to understand that the blessing of God often comes as we take up the challenge of the cross.

So where in your life do you need to trust God and resist your instincts for survival? Where are you in danger of losing your head in the heat of battle? Where are those places in our society and world that require our action to release the counterintuitive blessing of God?

Hear this word from God again:

"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."³

Thanks be to God for *this most challenging* word. Amen.

³ Mark 8.34-35.