

The Second Sunday in Lent, February 25th 2018
St. John's Lutheran Church: Summit, New Jersey
Mark 8:31-38

Grace be to you and peace from God our Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.

Back in the dark ages, before I graduated from seminary, we had to write an essay for our Candidacy Committee describing our understanding of ministry. I'm guessing such a practice still happens today. I'll never forget the passage that I had to write on: it was Genesis 12:3, the call of Abram. Now the Lord said to Abram, *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* I guess I wrote enough to convince my committee that I really was being called by God to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, because here I am 34 years later still having the privilege of being a pastor.

That was Genesis 12, God's call to Abram. Now fast forward to this morning's text in Genesis 17 and we learn a bit more about how his call was going to unfold. When Abram was asked to follow God, he was asked to give up life as he knew it. He had to give up his name, leave his country, abandon his ancestors and walk out into a new life, trusting that God would provide for him.

Change is hard enough when you're young. But imagine having to do all that moving around when you're old. It's a pretty tough thing to do. Old folks usually don't like change, and Abram and Sarai were old. But Abram trusted God. "If you agree to follow me," God said to Abram, "If you let go of everything you know, I will make you the father of many nations. You'll be the ancestor of kings and the beginning of a new kind of humanity.

You'll no longer be Abram, but Abraham; your wife no longer Sarai, but Sarah. But in order to gain all of this, you have to give up on yourself, on all your ideas about who you are and who you serve." In order to let God change his life, Abram had to let go of who he was and be willing to let God make him anew.

When Jesus called his disciples, a similar kind of change needed to take place. They were called to leave their families and be "roadies" with Jesus. I often wonder who supported their wives and children while Peter, James, John and the others were travelling around Galilee with Jesus. Regardless of whom they left in charge, those first disciples still left home, family, and even their jobs so they could wander around with Jesus as he preached, healed and taught.

As they continued to move around the Galilean country side, it became increasingly important for Jesus to make sure that his disciples knew what they had gotten themselves into. Just a few verses before today's Gospel lesson, they had been in Caesarea Philippi and Jesus had wondered if after 3 years of being with him, his disciples really understood who he was and what his mission was. So as they walked along, he asked them: "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Then Jesus became even more pointed in his questioning: "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." And Jesus told them in no uncertain terms not to tell anyone about him.

When Peter called Jesus the Messiah, he understood Jesus to be the conquering hero. He thought Jesus was the one who was going to save their people from Roman oppression and usher in a new day of peace and self-rule for the Jewish people. But Jesus' understanding of who he was as "Messiah" was very different than Peter's understanding. In fact, he didn't even refer to himself as the Messiah, but rather as "the Son of Man". And he told them that he was going to endure great

suffering, be rejected by religious leaders, be killed, and after three days, rise again. And he said all this quite openly. Clearly what Jesus was telling them didn't match their expectations of what the Messiah was.

So good old Peter, who sometimes spoke before he thought, ended up putting his foot in his mouth. He took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, to try and straighten him out. "No way, Jesus. Suffering, rejection and death are not part of the messianic agenda. Prestige and power are. We signed on for a crown, not a cross!" Peter's Messiah is one for whom the way to victory is the way of power and might. It's the way in which might equals right and results in a glorious kingdom.

After listening to Peter's diatribe, Jesus looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!" Peter wanted and expected Jesus to take another path to becoming the Messiah --- the path of winning, not losing; of strength, not weakness. But Jesus makes it clear to those first disciples and to us, that this is not the way of God.

"If any want to become my followers", says Jesus, "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." The difference between setting our minds on divine things rather than on human things is what Luther says is the difference between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross.

The theology of glory is built on what we expect God to be like and how we want God to act. It's what people *want* in a god. The theology of the cross is about the way God shows up and is revealed in pain, suffering and weakness. And it goes against the grain of everything that people imagine *God* to be.

You see, people want a God who is powerful, not one who is weak and vulnerable. We want a God of certainty, not ambiguity; a God that we can manipulate, not one who makes and molds us after God's own will. But the God to whom Jesus pointed as God's anointed one, the Messiah, is the God who was willing to be conquered in order to conquer hatred, violence and death. As Luther said, 'to know God truly is to know God in Christ, to know God hidden in suffering, to know God crucified.'

The God who comes to us in suffering is the one who will not be reduced to a sound bite of "our thoughts and prayers are with you" but rather one who is willing to lay down in front of the White House with those young people from the Margory Stoneman Douglass High School to draw attention to their 17 classmates and teachers who died last week.

The God who comes to us in suffering is the One who is being silenced, tortured and killed in the many countries around the world where it is illegal to be a Christian. Whether in North Korea, Somalia, Iraq or Afghanistan, or other countries around the globe, thousands of Christians are imprisoned, and have been tortured and killed because they follow Jesus. These courageous brothers and sisters really understand what Jesus meant when he said, "If any want to become my followers deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

In his novel, "Night" Jewish writer Eli Wiesel described a scene from the Holocaust that so powerfully describes what Luther meant when he wrote about the theology of the cross. As Wiesel and others marched past the victims who had been hanged, one was a child who hadn't as yet died. Wiesel said that behind him, he heard a man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within him, Wiesel heard a voice answer: "Where is He? This is where--hanging here from these gallows..."

Here is God, in a Syrian refugee camp. Here is God, packing up belongings in one church to get ready to move into their St. John's "home" this week as we once again host our Family Promise

kinfolk. Here is God, in the little children crying out in Summit, and Newark and Elizabeth because they fear that their parents will have been deported when they get home from school. Here is God --- grieving with the students and families of those whose have died from gun violence in Parkland, FL. and Newtown CT and Orlando and Las Vegas and Columbine and Charleston and on and on and on.

Here is God, with those who are sick, weak and suffering; with the broken-hearted and those who are grieving. That's what the theology of the cross is all about. Jesus is calling us to take up our crosses and follow him; to join him by sharing in his suffering, if not in our persons than most assuredly in our prayers. Today friends, Jesus is challenging all who would follow him to take up the cross, not as a piece of jewelry but as a way of reminding us that through an instrument of torture and death God showed us the most amazing love and gave us the gift of forgiveness and life, both here and in the hereafter.

The Lenten message is not an easy one to hear, especially when it comes with a call to take up the cross. But it was a cross that Jesus was preparing for when he said, "This is my body, given for you; this is my blood shed for you." Each time with receive this visible word in our hands, we remember God's sacrificial love given to us in Jesus. May we feast on this gift of love and then go into the world to be the body of Christ --- to be Jesus' hands and compassionate heart as he embraces this hurting world. Amen.

Rev. Gladys G. Moore