

Lent 2, February 28, 2021

Sermon

(Mk 8:31-38; Ps 22:23-31; Gen 17:1-7, 15-16)

The holy gospel according to Mark, the 8th chapter (8:31-38)

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan,” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “All those who want to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For all who want to save their life will lose it, but all who lose their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? If any of you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Deny yourself! Take up your cross! Follow me! These words from Jesus sound like we need *walking shoes*, not pew cushions!

This is the year of Mark’s gospel, where Jesus’ disciples never quite get who he is. They’ve been following him for some three years. They’ve watched him perform miracles of healing and of nature, they’ve heard him teach, they’ve worshiped with him—but they really don’t understand what kind of Messiah he’s supposed to be.

Do we? That question demands our Lenten attention. For Jesus, *messiahship* or *lordship* involved reaching out to the last, the least, the little, the lonely, and the lost. Jesus was the embodiment, the fulfillment, of the Old Testament prophecies which commanded **justice, righteousness, and steadfast love** for *all* people.

Lent 2, page 2, sermon

And because he was dealing mostly with outcasts, the untouchables of his day, the physical cures Jesus provided did more than heal the body. The harsh laws of the Pharisees, scribes, and elders strictly barred *anyone* with any visible physical deformity from even entering the Temple. So when Jesus healed a person, that person was healed indeed, able to reintegrate into the normal daily and worship life of Israel.

I want to make a contextual comment here—you know my favorite word is *context*. In today's reading from Mark, Jesus made a comment about "this adulterous and sinful generation." This doesn't mean that married people in Jesus' day were committing adultery to a higher degree than usual.

In the context of *faith*, of obedience to God, *adultery* meant worshiping an idol, a false god. God speaks of his chosen people committing adultery with the *Baals*, the Canaanite gods of weather and fertility.

- **"Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood"** (Jeremiah 3:9). That is, the people made and worshiped gods of stone and wood.
- The Lord said to Ezekiel, **"They committed adultery with their idols; they even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them"** (Ezekiel 23:37).

Likewise, in the New Testament *adultery* is used to describe religious infidelity, as in today's gospel.

This begs the question: what idols do *we* worship? That's a good point to ponder during our Lenten journey.

Looking back now to the focus of Jesus' words today, we're reminded not only of *justice, righteousness, and steadfast love*, but also of Micah's prophetic call to us, **"to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."**

Lent 2, page 3, sermon

Most of us probably desire the wholeness of *shalom*—that **justice, righteousness, and steadfast love**—for ourselves, our families and friends. If the same *shalom* could extend to the rest of the world, that would be nice. But it's hard for this nation right now to look beyond our own horizons with compassion and mercy.

Mainline Christianity in the United States has, for the most part, forgotten, or at least neglected, this call to social justice. But when Jesus tells us to **deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him**, it's hard to explain away—because *that* was what Jesus himself was all about!

That's what our Lenten journey is all about—a time to study and reflect, to remember and repent, to confess to God and then make changes in our lives.

Last week we learned about the first covenant, affirmed by the rainbow, when God actually regretted the devastation of the Flood. Today's first reading, also from Genesis, established a *new* covenant between God and his chosen one, Abraham.

Jesus himself is the final fulfillment of the covenants of the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the *Old Testament*. The covenant relationship God sought so eagerly and often among our ancestors in the faith—that covenant relationship will be sealed *by his blood* in just a few weeks.

Along with Peter—who was rebuked as *Satan* by Jesus—along with Peter and the other disciples, we follow Jesus now to Jerusalem: to the Upper Room where he'll celebrate his Last Supper with his disciples; to the temple palace of Herod and the palace of Pilate; then to Golgotha, the place of the skull, to his crucifixion and death. We'll follow him from there to the borrowed tomb in a nearby garden—and from there we can't follow him until we, too, take leave of this life.

But *we shall* follow him from there, because of the *new covenant* he made with his disciples, and makes again with us: his own blood of the new covenant, poured out for us, and for all, for the forgiveness of sins. For the restoration of broken relationships. For freedom from shame and guilt. For strength for the journey. -- Thanks be to God!