

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Sermon 2.25.24

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

**Mark 8:31-38**

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (411)

The funny thing is that up until now Jesus seems to have had very little tolerance for suffering. And I don't mean tolerance as a mood-state. I mean it as a material state. It seems to have been woven into his very being, an intolerance for the suffering of others. He would arrive on a scene where someone was suffering, or someone so suffering would arrive where he was, and the source of their suffering would flee away. Like darkness at the kindling of light, the source of suffering, whatever it was (an unholy spirit, a sickness, a demon or a whole legion of demons), would be set to flight at the closeness of Jesus, who was, it seems, the very presence of God, the very fullness of God.

Really, up until now Jesus seems to have been implying that you're free to change your state of suffering. You don't have to accept it. You can change it: if you can change it, then you're

free to change. Likewise, or perhaps more so, if you can change someone else's state of suffering then please do so. There is no glory in suffering per se, it seems. There is no reason that suffering, having found you, is now yours to live with. God doesn't use suffering to test you or to demonstrate by contrast how very good God is. Suffering is a thing of the world. Release from it is the will and reign of God. So, release yourself as you can; release others as you can.

That's what has seemed to be the case so far.

But now this: "...the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly."

Which is another major change in policy, by the way. Now, not only is suffering something that at the least the model and perfecter of our faith will tolerate, will indeed accept. Now also he would say such things out loud, quite openly. This, though after days, weeks, months maybe of telling everyone not to tell anyone anything. After every encounter with anyone, Jesus would say this: "Say nothing to anyone." After every healing, every restoring, after every encounter which left people better, he would tell them not to tell anyone else about it.

This is what's come to be called the Messianic secret, Jesus' insistence especially in the Gospel of Mark that we keep all this wonder-working, all this astonishing presence and fullness of God, quiet for now, something that happened just between us.

Why would he counsel such quiet?

I have a young colleague whose father just died. It wasn't expected. It will involve trips back home, which is far away. It will be exhausting, a whole ordeal. He was so alive! And they were close. And as she looks to her preaching in coming weeks, she wonders at whether to trade on this. "Vulnerability in the pulpit has its place," she explained that she knew. She has no need to seem invulnerable.

On the other hand...

Young preachers are always mining their experience, hoping that God is lurking in every moment. This, so you have something to say come Sunday. The good news is that God is lurking in every moment. The bad news is that Sunday is always coming and worse is that the secret self you lived in God prior to when you became a preacher still needs some time in secret. But now your life in God is your stock in trade. It doesn't really belong to you anymore,

except that it does.

“Don’t turn this into a preaching point just yet,” I advised her, not that advice is ever all that useful. “Let your father’s death be yours for a while, not to suffer it alone but also not to turn it into something useful for the pulpit.” Hold it for a minute. Hold it for a few weeks, and let it hold you.

I wonder if this is part of what Jesus meant in advising people to let their encounter with him be just that for now. True, he wasn’t ready to go public just yet. True, he had work to do before really attracting the dangerous attention of the authorities, both religious and imperial. But he also might have meant to permit the people—so astonished!—to hold that for a while. You had a close encounter with God? Well, let it be yours for a little bit.

There’s so strong an imperative in the Hebrew tradition to speak of what the Lord has done. It’s all over the place in the psalms. It’s just as strong a presence in other wisdom literature. “I will speak of what God has done for me. I will tell of it in the congregation. Generations to come shall be taught of the Lord, what mighty deeds he did for the people from of old.” It’s a good impulse.

But just as good, it seems to me, is keeping quiet about it all, at least for a time. Let it be an intimate thing. Hold it and be held by it. See if it takes root in your soul, becomes something true and trustworthy. There will time to speak, plenty of time to speak. But once it’s spoken, it’s very hard to get it back into the secret closet of your soul, as one medieval mystic put it.

I knew a faithful church-goer once, quiet, always at prayer but not in such a way as you could notice. Someone once dismissed her to me in conversation. Not knowing that I knew her, this other person said, “She’s not much. She doesn’t have much in the way of ideas, nothing much to say.”

Not true, is what I knew.

But now there’s this: he said all this quite openly. Of the suffering he must undergo, of being tried and killed and on the third day raised, he said all this quite openly. No wonder Peter was bewildered, for not only the open talk of it all but also for the sudden tolerance of suffering, the even *choosing* of suffering, even preaching suffering. “If any want to become my followers, let them take up the cross...”

The must-ness of it might make it seem otherwise. The stated fact that Jesus *must* undergo great suffering: this might make it seem like he had little choice in the matter. Like it was some requirement. There are whole soteriologies built on this “must.”

Soteriology is the study of salvation. As theology is God-talk or the study of God, and Christology is Christ-talk or the study of Christ (his nature and function), soteriology is the salvation-talk, *soteria* being Greek for salvation, soteriology therefore being the study of salvation—the saved from what and the saved for what and the how of it all.

Whole soteriologies are built on the must-ness of Jesus' suffering, the worst of which is so-called substitutionary atonement. This is the very commonly believed assertion that human sin was so bad and made God so angry that, in order for it all to be made right, someone had to pay, God required someone to pay. But human beings weren't up to the task, so bad is our sin and so weak is our nature. So, Jesus took our place in punishment, a substitute, a substitute for us in assuaging God's terrible wrath. This is commonly thought.

It's also very much questioned among people who stop to think about it.

The problems with it are rife. It requires a facile understanding of sin: that sin is simply bad behavior that we choose on an individual level and therefore something for which we can be held wholly, individually responsible. But sin is far more complicated than that, as a part of the nature of things, as something we're as enslaved to as we are choosers of.

It also requires a brutal understanding of God. That God seeks punishment above all else, and that God would be unsatisfied with any punishment short of human death, God becomes more an abusive father than a loving father, one who uses violence as a way to save us from our sinful reliance on violence. All this, though how violence plays out in the world would have us recognize that it really doesn't work that way. Violence doesn't save us from violence. It creates pretext for further violence.

But problems aside, rife as they are, substitutionary atonement also isn't Markan. For our gospel writer, the must-ness of Jesus' death isn't about something God requires. It is about something the world won't tolerate but that Jesus won't give up on.

Jesus is the very presence of God in our midst. The world will have none of that. The powers that have come to occupy this world will have none of God's loving and saving reign. But Jesus can't *not* be that. Jesus can't *not* be the very presence and manifestation of God's loving and saving reign. He maybe could try. He maybe could fake it, that he was just another guy in the world trying his best, but ready to capitulate should it come to that.

That's not a huge crime, which is maybe what Peter was counseling in his rebuke. Just lay low. Just take it easy. Don't be so uncompromising in making manifest the whole and good reign of God. Because, the cross? Who said anything about the cross? Everything's been going so well!

Whatever it was, Jesus has little patience for it, preaching to the crowd against what Peter has just expressed. “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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

“Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation,” he might have said with a glance over to Peter, “of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

It's worth wondering what inspired such sharp talk.

Remember, according to Mark, Jesus was declared the Beloved Son of God in his early adulthood, at his baptism. It's not imagined in this gospel narrative that this status was native to Jesus. Mark's gospel has no notion that being the Christ something Jesus was born as or born into. His being the anointed one of God, the Messiah, the Christ: this was something he was learning along with the rest, if maybe in some advance of the rest.

So maybe he was as unnerved as Peter at this dawning realization that this is how this whole thing would go, that this is what happens when something radically good comes face to face with a world that will have none of it, or will have perhaps just pieces of it, a bit here, a bit there, but certainly not the whole of the kingdom of God which would foreclose on the present occupation of all this unholiness.

Pieces of God, maybe, but not the whole of God's presence.

As if God could be any less than the whole of God.

And so, Jesus *must*. The requirement wasn't God's. It was a requirement of all that is not God, a requirement on the part of not-God that all of God has got to go.

To ask that it be otherwise, to insist that it be otherwise, rebuking Jesus: Jesus called this insistence a setting of the mind not on divine things but on human things, and the spirit of doing so he called Satan. This is to say “the accuser” or “the adversary.” And *this* is to say that Jesus wasn't calling Peter a nasty name in referring to him as Satan. He was naming a spirit by which Peter was operating. Peter was, if inadvertently, being adversarial to the good will of God, adversarial to the hard fact of God's presence which can't compromise or be but a partial version of itself, which can't prioritize its own survival. To hope that it would is to demand that the divine be as the human, rather than to aim that human become as the divine.

We're always trying to make God in our image. Christ comes that we might be made in God's image, evermore made in God's image, willing even to take up the cross—which we'd do not

because suffering is saving; no, not because suffering is to be tolerated for its somehow leading to glory. Suffering as a category of experience isn't itself what Jesus was advocating here. Really, suffering is but a secondary effect. It can come when you put a broader wellbeing ahead of your own. It can come when you seek an excellence that is though costly.

We need not accept suffering as "just the way it is." We also must not live in total avoidance of suffering, though it might strike us as the worst thing that could happen.

The tragic fact is, whether suffering is sought and felt as perversely satisfying, or whether it's accepted as happening "for a reason," or whether it's assumed to be avoided at any and all cost, it will befall us. It will sneak in the back window when we have secured all the locks on the front door. We will suffer in this life. We will have bodily pain, heart-rending loss, tragic setback, treacherous relating, you name it. One, maybe more, of this variety is coming for us each and all.

The question then is whether there is any redemption in it, whether the suffering is merely injustice (the suffering of a slave, the suffering of an abused spouse or child) or whether it's suffering because of a squaring off against injustice (the suffering of medical treatment in face of an otherwise early death, the suffering of prison-time for standing up to political violence). The point for discerning is whether what cross we find ourselves carrying is the one of torment set to the purpose of abusive power or personal manipulation, or is one of redemption, some little shoot of new life pressing its way through.

The terrible thing is that we don't always know, we can't always tell. We hold out hope for too long or we abandon hope too soon. Pontius Pilate and the chief priests and the whole taunting crowd thought the cross Jesus was made to carry was put easily to their worldly purpose. God had another thing in mind. But how could anyone possibly have known? Really, who'd have guessed this?

When our hope falters, God is yet at work. When our discernment blunders, God continues in wisdom. We are called to participate in our own redemption, in the world's redemption. We are charged as those of the earliest crowd were charged to take up our cross, to labor toward redemption. But we also can rest assured that God's success in taking over this whole sorry scene doesn't come down to whether or not we get it right. We will not get it right. Not always. Maybe not even usually. There is timely satisfaction when we do. There is eternal success because of God, our creator and our redeemer, our point of origin and our glorious end and our faithful companion along the way.

Work hopefully and rest assured.

Thanks be to God.