2nd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 2.28.21

Romans 4:13-28
For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Mark 8:31-38
31 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 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. 35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 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." (535)

Let me explain: Jesus will die because powerful people will object to his mission of filling the world with God's healing love.

It's really that simple.

Jesus will die because powerful people invested in the status quo will be frightened and offended by his mission of filling the world, as he himself was filled, with God's utter and immediate presence, so they will kill him. He knew that this would be the result if he kept at it, and he would keep at it.

It's really that simple.

Hence the "must" of it. Hence the "must" of his assertion, that he "must undergo great suffering." This has been thought to mean his suffering was a requirement of some sort. It's even been thought to have been a requirement of God. It's been thought that God requires Jesus to be sacrificed in order for God's wrath at our sinfulness to be quenched.

This is not scriptural. It's certainly not Markan. I'd go so far as to say it's wrong.

This is a doctrine known as vicarious atonement or substitutionary atonement—that Jesus was sacrificed in our place because our sin was so bad that we couldn't bear the cost of it ourselves, couldn't ourselves bear the cost of coming clean before God. So, Jesus did it for us, as God required.

This is not strictly scriptural. It's certainly not Markan. I'd go so far as to say it's wrong. It suggests something of God that is wrong—that God's wrath is so great at the fact of pervasive sin, though amidst a creation that *God is creating* (suggesting that sin is somehow also of God's creating), that he needed someone to die in order for his love to win out. And forget that, if sin pervades, then it can hardly be our *fault* when we participate in it: though we do bear some responsibility, it's limited.

This doctrine of atonement, vicarious or substitutionary, comes to us from the 10th century, Anselm of Canterbury. And though it can be constructed with a very specific reading of a few short lines from scripture, it isn't, as I've said, deeply scriptural and it isn't Markan, Mark, our gospel writer whose idea of the cross was hardly so convoluted as all that. It was on the contrary very simple, very straightforward—and I'll say it again because my guess is you've heard the formulation of substitutionary atonement many times so hearing a correction is important. Lucky for us the correct understanding is a lot simpler than the Anselmian explanation. Jesus would undergo suffering because the world wouldn't accept what Jesus was about in the world, would reject it, even violently—and yet the threat of this unsurprising real-world response to his making present disruptive love wouldn't sway him from making present disruptive love. Therefore, he must die.

And this is the "must" of it. The word here is *dei*, "it is necessary," and too often it's taken to mean that Jesus' mission was mainly to suffer and die. But that's not what this gospel text means for us to understand. Instead, it's this: it is necessary for Jesus to undergo great suffering because powerful people will oppose both Jesus' healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption this mission brings to established law and order—and their opposition will become violent. It will, however, not make Jesus stop.

So, the real epiphany here isn't that it was Jesus' *mission* to die, "but that his faithfulness to God's healing mission will inevitably *result* in his death." According to one scriptural scholar whom I read this week, "In Mark, Jesus 'must' die because his commitment to human healing will not falter."

It really is that simple.

Peter would prefer it otherwise. That's what this section of the gospel is largely about. Peter had just prior to this confessed Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus had asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and they had answered, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Then Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." In short, Peter had just gotten something deeply right.

Now, however, it seems he's gotten something deeply wrong. Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. But that doesn't mean what Peter likely thought it would mean. The Messiah had long been a hoped-for figure. Among Israelites and Judeans, the Messiah had long been anticipated as someone who would drive imperial forces out of the land, be they Assyrian or Babylonian or Persian or Roman. The Messiah would, it was thought, restore the Davidic kingdoms to their prior sovereignty and flourishing, would, like David, be a mighty warrior-king.

This is what Peter was likely confessing when he recognized something singular in Jesus—that he was this sort of messiah.

So, the next thing Jesus would say, this talk of suffering, this talk of being killed: this was anathema. It just didn't make any sense.

It was enough that this is the first time anywhere in the gospel notions of suffering would come up.

And it's important to recognize here that what Mark has us in for is a gospel, which is a bit of good news. The story he's telling here he introduces as the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and it's important to recognize that a gospel is but a bit of good news, was like an ancient press release about something of general interest to the people of the realm. That Megan Markle is pregnant, that Princess Charlotte has started preschool: this was the typical content of gospel. So, this is what Mark has promised us, a bit of good news about someone who seems sort of like a nobody but who turns out to be a wonderful healer and restorer and maybe even someone to reestablish the old royal line.

Now, though, that this one is to undergo great suffering: that's not gospel. That's not a bit of good news. That is a deep well of troubling news.

But it isn't just Mark who broke with expectation. It's moreover Jesus who was breaking with expectation, for one thing a warrior-king messiah wouldn't do is suffer, to say nothing of being killed.

Consider, though: for such things not to happen to Jesus, he would have to yield. For this ugly fate not to befall Jesus, it would mean that Jesus had given way—because the power structures weren't about to. Those can't risk yielding to someone challenging their authority. They never can. When the forces draw the line, if they don't hold the line, then people will know. People will know—they're not serious, they're not indominable. They have to save face. So, at that point, their only choice is advance, even violent advance.

What Peter was in effect advocating, then, when he rebuked Jesus was for Jesus to abandon his path, to abandon the way of the Lord; and this, in effect, was as tempting a thing as Jesus might have faced in the wilderness with the devil.

Devil comes to us from the Greek *diabolos* meaning to divide or to separate. It's akin to the Hebrew *ha' Satan* meaning adversary. Both would divide Jesus from the divine which was utterly present within him. Both would present as opposing rather than withstanding. And this means Jesus wasn't calling Peter a nasty name in saying to him, "Get behind me, Satan." He was naming the spirit in which Peter was now acting, in opposition and adversarial. This, when what Peter was actually to do was to join in faithfully walking with Jesus in the Way, continuing to walk in the Way no matter what.

I'm sorry this is so explainy a sermon. I generally don't enjoy sermons that are mostly explanation. The Christian faith is about so much than what we think, and effective worship is to be so much more than clear explanations that equip the saints with a capacity to go on to explain to others.

But this point, that Jesus must suffer and be killed, though not because God requires such a thing but because the world cannot easily tolerate the presence of God as manifest in Jesus: this point is one that's come up recently in both the Bible study and the book group studying the Gospel of Mark. It's come up in the context of people finding new appeal in their familiar old religion because it's more appealing than their Sunday school education had them know.

And it's funny, don't you think, that most of the faithful finished their formal education in the faith at the age of thirteen or so, when Sunday school gives way to confirmation. This means we're largely operating on elementary knowledge at best. But about what other aspect of our lives do we consider ourselves fully educated for having completed our study of it at the age of thirteen.

Would you understand your physical wellbeing based on what you learned in junior high bio? No? Would you consider yourself fully read into the literary tradition if you never read anything past eight grade language arts? No? What about your taste in music or the arts? Was that fully cultivated by the time you hit puberty? So why do we tend to think as regards this most mysterious and complex, though also very simple, set of considerations—the essence of God, the nature and meaning of the world, the origin and end of time, the purpose and potential of the human being, the saving mystery of the cross—that an hour a week for the length of our youth might bring us up to speed?

It's funny. And for the trained clergy and theologians among us, it's a little infuriating, but only when we come across someone who's really pretty sure. I met someone once who said reading the Bible as easy as reading the ABC board books of babyhood. "Then you're doing it wrong," was my thought.

Relatedly, why do we tend to teach and learn something as convoluted as substitutionary atonement when the truth of it is likely something far simpler—that Jesus had to die because his unswaying work in making present in the world God's healing and saving love was something the powers and principalities would not tolerate and could easily kill off? Why so convoluted, and not just this obvious and time-tested truth?

Well, maybe this is why: that, as simple as this is, it's also troubling because it suggests something terrible about the world—that the way we aim to live, if indeed we aim to follow Jesus, won't make us safe, might indeed make us unsafe. And we really want to be safe. *I* want to be safe, often more than I want to be saved.

And yet we are to do it. If we aim to have our lives saved, then we're to do it, to follow, to follow even to the cross of self-giving love.

Marcus Borg, whose book we're reading in book club, suggests something more faithful to scripture than substitutionary atonement. His proposal is for participatory atonement—which is to say not that Jesus accomplished atonement with God, and a living forth God's presence and love, on our behalf, but that Jesus did it most absolutely, more courageously, most self-givingly, that we who aim to follow might imagine so doing as well. Insisting upon the truth no matter the cost, pursuing justice for all creation no matter the cost, standing in love no matter the temptation to self-preservation or the pursuit of power for its own sake: this is ours to do as well.

Borg commends not vicarious atonement but participatory atonement—as if there is something we can do for ourselves to make of our lives a living forth of redemption. To insist

upon the truth no matter the cost to ourselves; to pursue justice for all creation no matter the cost to ourselves; to stand in love and speak of love no matter the temptation we face to preserve ourselves—our own good standing, our own wealth and power; to lose our life so we can find it: this is ours to do as well.

Of course, I list these as if this it's all so very clear—what truth is, what justice looks like and how it's best to be realized, what love is beyond gooey feelings, a loss of life that isn't mere indecision or wandering and self-sabotage, and certainly isn't a putting up with abuse as if suffering itself is redemptive. (It's not.) But Borg doesn't speak of participatory atonement as if it isn't itself a project that could take a lifetime of committed discernment, not to mention circumstances and even historical moments that demand from us courageous righteous response. I think of the moment that needed the man, Martin Luther King. I think of the moment that needed the woman, Fiona Hill. I think what such moments and our response to them entail is a prayerful willingness to suffer for the sake of the truth, for the sake of God's good will, which (God's good will) is for all that God has made.

Are you willing to bear the cost of discipleship, as Jesus did so very much, as any of us might on any given day if to a much lesser degree?

Are you?

It would make sense if your honest answer on any given day is, "No," or "Please, no." And if it's "Yes," then we might well be people who can save our lives, who can open our lives that Jesus might save them. But if it's "No," or at least it's sometimes, "No," well, this is the mystery of the cross—that somehow Jesus' submitting to it, only to be raised again, accomplishes something that even our most committed participation can't accomplish.

But neither does it need to, for it is as Paul said in his very challenging letter to the Romans, that Jesus our Lord was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised because of our justification.

This is to say, Jesus was handed over to death because of our participation in, and propagating of, powers and principalities that run roughshod over especially the meek and lowly; and Jesus was raised because of our justification, which would have us bound for glory though not for our own worthiness but because of God's amazing grace and saving love.

Participatory and vicarious, Jesus on the cross demands that we follow and forgives that we can't, often can't, while God's love never falters, an appeal so strong that we might find ourselves

living in that eternal love starting now. Yes, we might live, though yet amidst the kingdoms of this world, also and more so in the kingdom to come.

That's the best I can explain it—which gets to the real problem of explanatory sermons. When it comes to the matters we dwell amidst in worship, any explanation can only do so much. Past that, our best hope is to allow ourselves to get lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Thanks be to God.