

Taking up Our Cross©

Mark 8:31-36

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How is the Lenten journey going for you? Last week I invited those who were here to choose the road they would take to Easter. We have the Easy Street way – the way that keeps us doing what we always do every day - a busy life that keeps us spinning and give us no time for reflection on self or on the meaning of Lent, of Jesus passion or of Easter. We do get to Easter and enjoy the celebration of resurrection, singing glorious hymns and praising God for what He has done in breaking the power of death and sin in Christ.

There is nothing wrong with that, of course.

But for some of us, we prefer to choose the more difficult, longer road through Lent. It is the Wilderness Way – the quieter, more reflective journey that intentionally sets aside some of the normal activity in life to put ourselves in a place where we can talk and listen to God. It is also a place where we examine our self, our life. We often choose to give up something – to fast from something that we like a lot, that perhaps has become a great priority – and instead as we find ourselves missing that thing we find ourselves trusting, relying on God more.

The wilderness is a place where we might run into the Wild Things. Those are the things that rear their terrible heads when we have removed ourselves from so much noise of the world, when we are trying to focus on our relationship with God. Those are things like our cravings, our hunger, our longings and desires. They scream at us to be satisfied yet we bravely conquer them as we rely more and more on God.

It's not too late for those who haven't started the journey yet. Lent is a 40-day journey (not counting Sundays). There is still plenty of time to find the Wild Things in your life – if you choose the Wilderness Way.

But Jesus adds yet another thing for us to contemplate on the Lenten journey. This is the stuff of the wilderness. It is the nitty gritty of what we are here for.

Lent is about discipleship. It is reminding ourselves that while membership is important, discipleship is what we are called to focus on. But to be a disciple is to understand the one we follow, the Master.

Looking at our text today in Mark 8:31-36, we find Jesus with his disciples. They have witnessed Jesus' power, his miracles, his healings. They have seen him stand up to the religious leaders.

It is no wonder when Jesus asks, "who do you say I am" that Peter's answer is "You are the Messiah." At this point, they are sure he has what it takes to be the one who they

have longed for, the one who would be like King David, mighty and strong, the one who would at last overthrow the Roman government.

And Mark says after Peter states his belief in Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus then proceeds to tell them what this Messiah is like. He clearly tells them that he is going to be arrested and handed over to the authorities, he will suffer greatly and he will be killed.

And even though he tells them he will rise again from the dead, they either can't hear that part or even that doesn't matter to them. This is not the Messiah they want him to be.

We get this picture in our minds of Peter, putting his arm around Jesus' shoulder and taking him aside, saying "No, no. You are wrong. That's not what the Messiah is supposed to do. Don't scare us like this. This can't happen to you."

And here is Jesus, reminded of his own wilderness experience when the devil tempted him to use his power to end his hunger, to gain strength and esteem.

Peter was thinking in human terms and not in God terms and Jesus had to stop this tempting now. "Get behind me, Satan!" He said to Peter. I'd hate to be called Satan by Jesus, wouldn't you? Of course, Jesus was saying that Satan was using Peter to speak to him, to entice him to not go on with what he knew was the way.

And then Jesus called the whole crowd around him and started teaching them about being his disciple. It's like this:

- If you want to gain your life, you have to be willing to lose it.
- If you want to be first, you must be last.
- If you want to be my disciple you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.

Consider the cross: a symbol of shame, rejection, embarrassment and weakness. Most every Christian church has a cross in it somewhere. Some of rugged and some are elaborate. Protestant crosses are empty as we focus on the resurrection more than the suffering of Jesus. But I wonder if the wilderness isn't a time for not skipping over that suffering; if it is a time for considering our understanding of God.

Martin Luther said we best see God Christ. And in Christ we can't help but see the cross. Luther said there is a theology of glory – where God is all power and wisdom and might; and then there is the theology of the cross – The Lamb of God, the suffering servant, the one who died for the sins of the world – who hung there in shame, rejected, scorned, a failure in the eyes of the world.

In the theology of the cross, the paradox is that God's power and strength is found in suffering and weakness. It is through that very suffering and death that new life came bursting forth.

It was, of course, easier in Jesus' day and the early church era to imagine a cross of suffering, shame, rejection, It is believed that in Jesus day, the people had witnessed thousands of crucifixions in Galilee.

Jesus said you must deny yourself and take up your cross for my sake and the sake of the gospel.

We don't have much of a concept of what it means to suffer for the gospel, do we? We 21st century Americans are more apt to suffer from the indifference people show towards our Christian faith than we are to be beaten or killed for it.

Still, we do come face to face sometimes with the challenge of speaking out and standing up for the gospel. In an age known as a "post-Christian era" what does that mean for those of us who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ?

What is your cross? As a disciple, we are called to consider our cross, what we give up of ourselves, what we are willing to sacrifice, not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the good news that is still important today.

The difference between the wilderness way to Easter and the Easy Street short cut way to Easter is how we view the cross.

On the short cut we still hold the cross dear. It is an important part of our faith. We believe that Jesus' death on the cross was the cause of our salvation. But on this path to Easter, the cross before us is empty. We are all about celebration – we are post Easter people. We celebrate the resurrection even before we get to Good Friday.

And that's okay because it is all true. It is the crux of our faith – we are resurrection people!

But the Wilderness Way road is about seeing the cross for these 40 days of Lent in a different way than we Protestants usually look at it. In the wilderness of Lent, we can't help but see our precious Savior on the cross. We allow ourselves to remember how he suffered and bled, to remember that the forgiveness of my sins was in no way easy – that he gave his all for me – and for you.

In the wilderness, we reflect on the suffering, the self-sacrifice, the shame and embarrassment of the cross. And we wonder what it means for us today to take up our cross as disciples and follow him.

No one knows for sure what anyone else's cross is. But each of us needs to pray and consider what our own cross is about. Surely our individual cross's in 21st century America are different than they were for those disciples and for the early church in Jesus' day and the years just following.

This is about discipleship. True, honest, authentic discipleship. We can't know what it means to be a disciple if we don't know the one we follow. The Wilderness Way that contemplates Jesus on the cross – will give us a better sense of knowing. This is God who is the opposite of everything we think of with God. Instead of glory, there is shame. Instead of power, there is weakness. Instead of success there is failure, instead of winning, there is losing.

And Jesus said whoever wants to save their life, must lose it. Whoever wants to be first must be last. Whoever wants to follow me must deny himself and take up his cross and follow.

Which road do you choose? You will still get there. Easter will be our finish line in this Lenten journey. But will you seek the easy street or the wilderness way? The empty cross, or the one with Christ as a reminder? Just for 40 days – come with me on this long and difficult – but meaningful journey.

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