

## **Second Sunday in Lent February 25 2024**

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25;  
Mark 8:31-38**

In the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians we find a wonderful hymn about who Jesus is as the Christ. This hymn is meant to keep the new believers in Colossae from being distracted by all that surrounds them culturally about divine beings and powers. To make sure they know the truth of who this Jesus is because that understanding has a direct bearing on how we live in relationship to Jesus and to one another.

This is also what is happening in our texts today. Last week, we had the covenant God made with Noah and humans, as well as all creation, that God would never again destroy the earth by flood. Symbolized by what? A bow. Today we have God's covenant with Abram. Symbolized by what. Circumcision. What do we learn about who God is here? It is God who acts towards Abraham: "I will make my covenant", "I have made you the ancestor...", "I will make you exceedingly fruitful." God is the one who can make impossible promises. Promises that are true. God shows God's steadfast love and covenant faithfulness- God's *chesed*- because that promise holds true today. It is something that is shown throughout the ages- from wandering in the wilderness, to entering the promised land, through war, tribulation, exile in Babylon, and finally in God's Son come to them. God is faithful to God's covenant, God's promise.

Psalm 22 is the psalm Jesus quotes from the cross which begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." We read the end of that psalm, which shows that God is the one who is trustworthy even in the midst of our lament for what

has gone wrong around us. In the midst of our crying out to God. God is the one who hears and has acted! Under God's reign the poor eat and are satisfied, God hears the poor when they cry out! Who is this God? This is the one who sees, hears, and acts especially for those who are underneath in society.

Paul's classic text from Romans is one of the key tenants for us Christians who happen to be Lutheran. What Paul says clearly here is that God's covenant- God's contract is not just with a people- the Israelites- adherents of the law. Rather, in Jesus, God's covenant is with all who trust in God's word. Who believe in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being those things that do not exist. From creation, to ancestors more numerous than the stars, to a reign no human reign can touch. Only God does these things. What this means for us is that to be in right relationship with this God is to trust in God's promise. Trust that what God says is true. And live according to that trust.

But even with these witnesses, we humans continue to be confused about who God in Jesus is. We conflate God with other gods around us, with human understanding of what is important, what rulers do. We trust in what we know, not necessarily what God calls us to.

Back in October I was privileged to attend a continuing education event led by pastor and scholar Mark Davis on the Gospel of Mark. Davis has a unique take on what is going on in our gospel text this morning. He notes that every time Christ/Messiah is used as a title in the gospel it seems to indicate something other than what Jesus intends to be. To counter this, Jesus uses the language "Son of Man" which seems to ground who he is in the reality of the world, but also in

what he has been teaching them all along about what the reign of God, which has come near in Jesus, is about.

Just before this text Peter has told Jesus that the disciples are saying he is the Messiah. The Christ. This seems to be a triumphalistic view, one that mirrored in their minds the Roman Empire. That Jesus would march at the head of an army to wrest control from the Romans- military power, that he would bring all Israel under his political power, and then lead a righteous nation as a shining city on a hill to draw all nations to the worship of the one true God- religious power.

Jesus insists on taking another path. One that includes suffering and death. Jesus rebukes Peter for that triumphalistic thinking- using the same language as casting out unclean spirits. Your philosophy, your practical wisdom is set/captured on human mode, not divine mode. I wonder if Jesus' response is so vehement because he knows how important this is. Davis argues "that Peter is claiming a false Christology and Jesus discloses his impending death as a way of wrestling the term "Christ" away from its cross-less interpretation."

But why is our understanding of Jesus so important? Because it means two different things to be a disciple here. One is based on a human way of thinking that seeks to "gain the whole world". This is the imperial way of thinking. Domination. The emperor as the Christ/Messiah/Lord. As son of God. It is the glory of war where all your enemies fall vanquished, and you come through it all with just a few smudges of dirt. We win. Because we conquer.

Davis points out that this might be what Mark sees as the temptation of Jesus- in the wilderness, now, and in the Garden. To accept the human way of thinking and so (it would seem) avoid all the pain and suffering.

The other way of discipleship is the godly way of thinking- which accepts rejection, suffering, dying, and rising for the sake of the whole world. Even those who have done this to you. It is a way filled with healing, love, forgiveness.

Jesus lays this out to his disciples (including us). If you want to follow me, follow me as Son of Man. Follow me as one who casts out the unclean spirits that hold people in bondage and so upset those who think those people ought to be kept away from the “righteous” because of what they do and say. Follow me and heal those who are sick, forgiving them, bringing them shalom. Even though others will say they are getting what they deserve and don’t waste your time. You see the difference?

I like the way Pastor Brian Stoffregen looks at Jesus’ invitation for us to take up our cross and follow him. He is more inclined to see it as “a picture of the criminal carrying the cross through the city, rather than the actual crucifixion. As I understand it, the act of carrying the cross was a public display of guilt which resulted in ridicule and scorn from the people. With this understanding, the phrase might be paraphrased: "be willing to publicly display your faith and suffer the consequences that such a display might evoke."

In this understanding, Jesus dies because human thinking is opposed to his healing mission and the disruption that mission brings to the established (human) way of doing things. But unbeknownst to his opponents within the Jewish tradition, they are opposing the in-breaking of the reign of God. Just like the blind man just before this episode, they cannot see what is right in front of them.

One scholar put it this way, Mark is saying that the Son of God will not dial down his ministry to spare his own life, or even to ease his suffering. His commitment

to the healing of humanity literally knows no limits. And neither- Easter tells us- does God's life-giving power. For Mark, discipleship is not some comfortable affiliation with Jesus but a life-changing and potentially life-threatening commitment to him.

Life threatening because we continue to run afoul of the human thinking, the imperial thinking, both in the secular world and in the church. And it is threatened by the true Jesus.

You see a combination of both in Alabama Supreme Court Justice Parker's suggestion that America was founded explicitly as a Christian nation and discussed his embrace of the Seven Mountains Mandate — the belief that conservative Christians are meant to rule over seven key areas of American life, including media, business, education and government. Is this really divine thinking or human thinking? Is it rooted in helping the poor and underprivileged? Is it about healing? How does it feel about those who are in opposition to it? Would it look upon them with love?

This is why we are always asking ourselves am I following Jesus here, or am I following something else?

But even this brings us back to the beginning. Because as important as how we live our lives is... the important thing is not what we do, but that we trust. And that trust comes because God has acted. Our God is one who always comes down to us. Who chose Noah, who called Abram, who feeds the poor and hungry. Who hears the cries of the oppressed. God is the one who comes to the world in Jesus and says, Beloved! Listen to me! Follow me to the life that truly is life!

And imperfectly, begrudgingly, haltingly, we follow. And find that even while it can be harder in some ways- for the values of the reign of God are different from that of the reign of humans- it is still a life that truly is life. In relationship with God and each other.

We have been asking the question about who God is and who God in Jesus is. But for many of us that leads to the question, who am I. In baptism we are called beloved by God, claimed as children of God. In this Meal we are fed with Christ's own Body and Blood. Forgiven for those places we have fallen short of the reign of God, strengthened to continue the journey.

But in the end, perhaps Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it best in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. "Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine." And that is faith in a nutshell. A trust in God who is creator of all. Father of Jesus. Lover of humans. Who looks at us and says, "I love you, you are mine." And in the end, that is all that matters.