

THE RISK OF LIFE

God of dispossession, you rebuke our refusal to give up our idols, separate and safe: send us with Jesus on the way of the cross, that we might lose our love of death and take the risk of life, through Jesus Christ, the new covenant.

From Prayers for an Inclusive Church, Steven Shakespeare

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16, PSALM 22:22-30, ROMANS 4:13-25, MARK 8:31-38

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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MARK 8:31-38

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples 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."

We have our own cross.

And Jesus says it is unavoidable; if we try to avoid it and save our lives we will lose our lives or (and), if we lose our lives, we will find the depth of Reality in our lives. So it comes either way.

But we could have seen this coming.

And, of course, we did, we do....

We experience it all the time.

The cross is in the times our trust is betrayed, it is in our illnesses and injuries, it is in all of the ways our families test us and tend to fall apart, the dreams we have lost, the oppression, the abuse we have suffered, the opportunities lost. The cross is the realization that living is struggling, hurting, breaking, and losing.

And, as if we don't each have enough examples of the cross in our individual lives or here in our

faith community, there is the cross of shame and death starkly revealing human vulnerability in the pervasiveness of violence that, somehow, we have come to take in stride, most recently in the #neveragain school shooting in Florida. We are confronted by the cross in the #metoo movement that brings into the light what, clearly, many have suffered isolated and alone. We don't want to see the reality of the cross in the poverty that is deepening world-wide as the gulf of income disparity expands, hunger and food insecurity being only one result. And, of course, there is the cross in the larger enmity and the breakdown of politics and social structures that threaten not only what we remember of civility but bringing new levels and forms of crisis and warfare while we are still engaged in the old ones. Closer to home, the effects of fire and flood are still with us as new fires, new floods, and all the questions related to drought continue.

So to come to church and hear "take up your cross" is not really a shock.

We heard it in a slightly different way on Ash Wednesday: "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

We know the inadequacy of "thoughts and prayers" and know that, somehow, action with and on

behalf of others needs to carry our love and concern.

Jesus, in taking up his cross, says that God is present in all of our dying, not distant, not "on high," not "in heaven." Here. Now. Always.

And that was at the heart of that famous, tense altercation between Peter and Jesus in today's gospel reading, when Jesus tells Peter, in what has become a casual cliché directed at anyone tempting us with anything, but that was, for Jesus, truly a stinging rebuke of Peter: "get behind me, Satan!"

I've reminded you before of the verses leading up to today's reading. Just before what we hear in the gospel today we find:

²⁷ Jesus ... asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸ And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹ He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'

So (a few verses later, in today's gospel reading) when Jesus was talking about undergoing great suffering, being betrayed and rejected and dying he was turning Peter's world upside down – which, as Jesus repeatedly showed and shows, is one of God's signature moves.

Peter wanted one human being to be exempt, to have status,

to be elite, to not have to go through what all the rest of us have to go through in the process of living (and dying) on this earth. Peter's idea of "Messiah" was not the idea Jesus had, not the idea God had in coming among us in flesh and blood.

And Jesus was saying that it's just not possible to be human and come out unscathed. Not for him, not for us. His full humanity was like our full humanity – and ours like his.

In showing us how to take up our cross Jesus embraces it, does not avoid it. And while it does actually kill him, he also lives in it and through it. The paradox about which I was speaking last week.

A reminder about paradox: that it is a hallmark of our age, which Brené Brown defines from the Latin root as "seemingly absurd but really true." She notes that Carl Jung, the 20th century Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, argued that paradox is one of our **most valued spiritual possessions** and a great witness to the truth. Paradox causes us to be broad, large, and adaptive.

It sends grieving children, youth into the Florida statehouse to say #neveragain, even though their horror and loss are fresh and even though that's been said before.

Paradox is Good Friday and Easter lying just three days apart – but often not even that far apart, sometimes happening all at once. We are living, vibrantly, even while remembering that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

And it is good to recall that faith community, our life together as St. Mark's, even while being vulnerable in all the ways we each are individually, is also the place to be called again and again to the largeness of God's life in us and with us, the pervasive nature of love in all things and all people, (even when we can't see it) and to know in our practices and in our daily lives that life, being, creation, action, the totality of reality reaches around all of our losses, all of our dying. Here is where we remember, again and again, that we are, that all of humanity is "inextricably connected" (Brené Brown) and that our name is Love (Thomas Merton).



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