

Past Sermons

The Second Sunday in Lent
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Salt Lake City
12 March 2006

Since the beginning of the new church year in December, we've been taking our gospel lessons each Sunday, our glimpses of Jesus' life and ministry, from the gospel of Mark. It's hard to grasp the nature of Mark's gospel when you read these little snippets a week apart from each other. When read all at once, what jumps out at you about Mark, is the jumpiness of the stories, the immediacy of the text, the sparseness of the words. First Jesus did this, then at once he did this. He gives commands to the disciples. Follow me. Get up. Pick up your bed. Walk home. Give them something to eat. Go, sell everything you have. There's no time to wait to see how things develop.

Unless you spend time reading the whole story — you just get a snapshot of who Jesus is and what Jesus does. And not the whole picture album. Not the whole Jesus.

While the twelve disciples spent the time between these snapshots with Jesus, they too had difficulty grasping the nature of his ministry, the personality of his ministry. They didn't quite get the whole Jesus.

It is tempting to take Jesus a little snippet at a time but if we do we cannot expect to come to an understanding of who he really is. We can't only see a snapshot of him with the little children on his lap. Or as shepherd holding a baby lamb. We must take Jesus completely abandoned by the very folks who knew and loved him best. Jesus on the cross. Jesus in his grave. The capacity to receive the good news of the resurrection --- life from death ---- depends on our willingness to receive the wholeness of the story.

Like the rest of us, the disciples were not quite open to receiving the whole of the story. So many times, just like the rest of us, they knew how it was and how it was going to be.

In the scene immediately before today's lesson, Jesus asks the disciples who people were saying he was — John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. Jesus, realizing that once again they've missed the point, asks them but who do you say that I am. Peter, always quick with an answer, says you are the Messiah.

That was the right answer, wasn't it? Poor Peter. He tries so hard. This time he even used the right words. There must have been something in Peter's eyes which tipped Jesus off — which led Jesus to say he might be using the right words, but I don't think he knows what they mean. Words must match the reality in order to relay the message. And only through faith is that able to happen.

Jesus stops to specifically teach them about what it means to be the Messiah. The gospel at this point changes gears and instead of frantic healing and teaching around the countryside, now, it seems, we're in slow motion.

The disciples had already learned that God was compassionate. They had learned that God made people whole. What they had not absorbed was this reality: I will suffer, Jesus says. I will be rejected. I will be killed and after three days, I will rise from the dead. That's the reality. Mark says Jesus said it plainly. He said it openly.

Peter speaks up again. We cannot blame Peter for saying, nope. Not going to believe that. Perhaps this was not a defiant Peter, but a pastoral Peter: "That's OK Jesus. We all feel like that sometimes. You're tired. Take a few days off. You'll be back to healing and amazing people in no time." Perhaps Peter thought if he deflected those words of harsh reality, he could avoid the reality altogether. No one wants to hear someone they love talk like they're going to die.

If it were up to Peter, the Messiah would not suffer. He would ride his celebrity status like a donkey into Jerusalem, and all who were near him would benefit from his healing, and his teaching, and slaves wouldn't be abused anymore, Israel wouldn't be occupied by the Romans anymore and it would all be good, all the time. Who wouldn't want that?

We can certainly understand this thinking. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Problem of Pain* understands this thinking. He says "We want, not so much a father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven --- a senile benevolence whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day: "A good time was had by all.

We can understand this thinking because it is human thinking, not God thinking. If it were up to me, life would not be this hard. Faith would not be such a struggle. If it were up to me, I would be God.

Isn't that what Lenten self-examination is all about --- finding the ways in my lives that we make decisions, plan futures, shape relationships ---- as if it were all up to me? As if God were not God? It is so tempting to believe that if I were God, my life and the lives of those around me would be so much better. The harsh reality is I am not God. That reality is hard to accept.

Back to Peter, who thinks the way I do. No Messiah of mine is going to die rejected. It just doesn't have to be this way. When Peter says that, Once again, Jesus looks in Peter's eyes and reacts. The temptation was back. During Jesus' baptism retreat in the desert, the temptor had suggested that perhaps Jesus didn't need to suffer after all. Perhaps he could give people what they wanted. That would make them happy. Perhaps instead of suffering, Jesus could instantly fill any need he had.

Jesus hears the temptation in Peter's words, and sees the eyes of the temptor in Peter's look. Maybe things could work differently. But Jesus, choosing to go with reality, faithfully turns from the temptation to make us happy and puts that temptation in its

place, puts the temptor in its place, and puts God back in control of this journey. Jesus looks at the reality and chooses to move ahead, holding faithfully to God's promise, the promise that will be fulfilled in him.

Jesus turns to the crowd to teach them, and us, about discipleship in words no one wants to hear: losing one's life, bearing a cross, denying one's self. Faith, and faithfulness, are not easy concepts to understand and even more difficult to live, even for Jesus. Jesus faithfulness and Jesus discipleship led him to the cross. Just as the nature of the life and death of Jesus is not what was expected or desired, the nature of discipleship is not what we would want for ourselves.

Thank God it is not Jesus' fate we are called to follow when we are told that we must pick up the cross. But Jesus' faith. Jesus had the faith that we must embrace if we are to be disciples.

What was Jesus' faith? Jesus walked faithfully before God just as his ancestor, and our ancestor Abraham did. Jesus' faith was not his own. He had Abraham's covenantal faith. The faith we share with those faithful who have gone before us. Who like Abraham, faced impossibility and let God be God.

Abraham's and Sarah's reality was that bearing children would be impossible, and yet a son, the seed of God's covenant is given them. Abraham's faith is in a God who brings life to a barren womb, where there was no life. Jesus faithfulness is to a God who has brought sight where there has been blindness, wholeness to withered limbs. God's promise "I will be your God" is refreshed through the ages and renewed and fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of a Messiah, who suffers and dies. Jesus' faith, and the faith that compels our discipleship, is in a God who does the impossible, who brings life from death.

If we let God be our God, God creatively transforms that impossibility, our human weaknesses, and enables us to receive the promise in ways that we couldn't before. We are enabled, with faith, to walk in ways we could not and on paths would not walk before. That is discipleship.

We too are called to have Abraham's faith. Called to walk faithfully as Jesus did, with no illusions about how difficult the path ahead of us, how barren our lives are,. That's where the faith part comes in the bareness, in the impossibilities. That's where we hold fast to the covenant: God's promise to be God.

May God grant us the faith of Abraham and Sarah and Jesus. May our certainties be transformed into faithfulness. May God grant us the grace to receive the promise, and let God be our God. Amen.